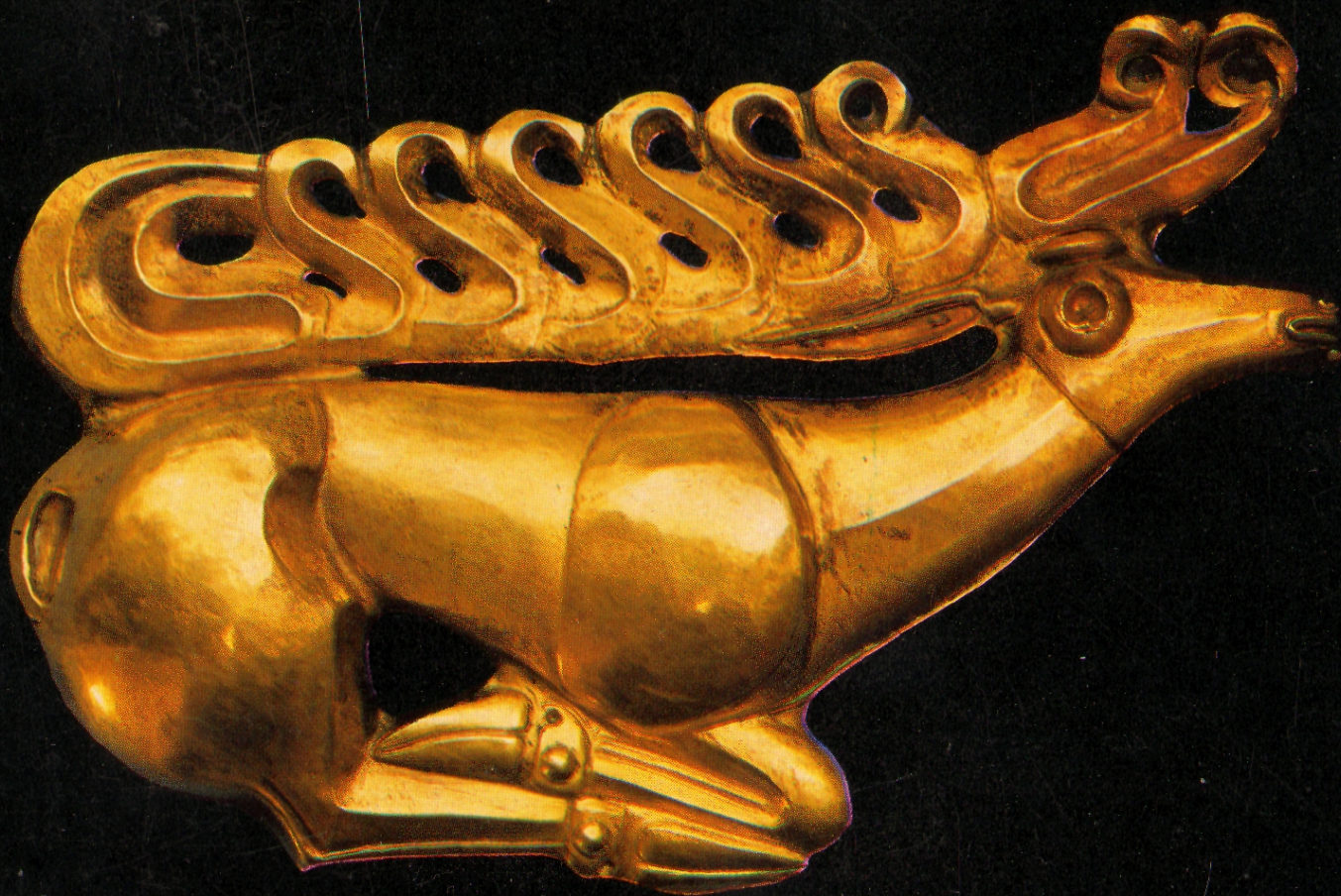


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# SCYTHIAN MYTHOLOGY





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## SCYTHIAN MYTHOLOGY

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# Introduction

The Scythians were an ethnos which played a considerable role in the ancient history of Eurasia and created remarkable works of art, which have been resurrected for a new life owing to the noble efforts of several generations of archaeologists. The varied Scythian monuments have attracted the special interest of researchers even to this day; however, they cannot be understood and interpreted fully if the mythology of this ethnos is not understood. According to contemporary scholarly views, during the early stages of human history it was precisely the mythology of one social group or another which served as a concentrated expression of the entire scope of notions about Nature and society, typical of that group, reflecting its understanding of the cosmic and social order, i.e. the notion about the structure of the world and of its place in that world. According to the definition given by the Russian researcher E.M.Meletinskiy (1976), mythology in the archaic society was a totally dominating way of global conceptualization and the soul of a unified and homogeneously semiotized culture, i.e. it was actually mythology that formed the entire range of varied sign systems through which each culture expresses itself. We have to take into consideration such a "mythological prism" not only when we study the semantics of the monuments of art, of ritual or cult objects, but also when we explore those spheres of the ancient social way of life and consciousness, which from a modern viewpoint appear to be completely autonomous from the religious and mythological thinking, e.g., from the notions of a certain society about its social structure, about the forms and functions of its political institutions, etc.

In other words, it is impossible to understand fully the culture of an ancient ethnos without studying its mythology.

Such an approach to the problem



makes it necessary to specify first of all what is to be understood by the term mythology in this book and which of the ancient monuments will be considered to be mythological monuments. The traditional notion about mythology as a set of myths, i.e. narratives about events from the remote mythological past, populated by deities, daemons, heroes, progenitors, narratives about the origin of the world, about how "everything happened the way it is", is absolutely correct, but it fails to exhaust the issue, which has another aspect as well. The very existence of these narratives was the only means which ancient men had to introduce order in the Universe around them in some way, to express their notions about its structure, and in other words – to give substance to the model of the world inherent to the concrete culture. In its turn, this model of the world, which defined all forms of activities of ancient man, found expression in monuments of a narrative and other nature, in symbolic images, in the structure of the dwellings, in the grave, in cult buildings, and in the understanding about space and the structure of the human body. According to the terminology accepted in modern research, it can be expressed through different codes. The present book will examine precisely this mythological model of the world of Scythian culture, which has found incarnations of a varied code nature.

It is necessary to make another thing clear as well, namely the exact meaning which we invest in the concept of "Scythians", because different specialists attribute different meanings to the name. The semantic differences have their historical roots. As is known, modern researchers have adopted the ethnonym "Scythians" from the ancient (Greek-Roman) tradition; the problem about the actual zone inhabited by the ethnic community bearing that name is solved in accordance with the interpretation given to the data relevant to that

tradition. Incidentally, even the ancient authors themselves did not by far invest the same meaning in the concept of "Scythians". They often used it very broadly to denote a wide range of tribes which inhabited the Eurasian steppes from the Lower Danube in the west to Southern Siberia and Central Asia in the east during the 1st millennium BC, as well as for the inhabitants of some forest-steppe and mountainous regions. The interpretation of the population of such a vast region as one ethnos seems to be initially justified in the evidence of the archaeological material: a large number of monuments dated to the 1st millennium BC, i.e. to the Scythian period, discovered throughout the cited territory, betray a certain similarity, which has given ground to many researchers to interpret all of them as belonging to the same – Scythian – culture.

However, more detailed further studies of these monuments have shown that their similarity is manifested above all in those features which are easily borrowed, which can easily pass from one culture or ethnic community to another. These monuments differ substantially from one another in a number of most essential features, forming a series of local variants, which actually mean different archaeological cultures whose carriers were different ethnic communities. In this connection, it is necessary to recall that the ancient tradition had another interpretation of the concept of "Scythians" as well. For example, the 5th century BC Greek historian Herodotus, who has left us the most detailed description of the life of the Scythians, has restricted severely the territory of Scythia between the northern Pontic coasts in the territory between the Danube (ancient Istros) and Don (ancient Tanaïs), using the name "Scythians" mainly when referring to the inhabitants of that zone. He even considered the lands to the east of the Tanaïs river, populated by the Sauromates – an eth-



nos which, according to Herodotus, originated from immigrants from Scythia and spoke a language close to the Scythian one – as non-Scythian lands. Herodotus (IV, 6) informs that the population of Scythia called themselves “Skolotoi”, while “Scythians” (*Skythai*) was the name given to them by the Greeks. However, the linguistic analysis undertaken by O. Semereni, I.M. Dyakonov, and others, has shown these two names to be dialectal forms of the same ethnonym, fixed at a different time and in different ways through the Greek language. This ethnonym is known to us in another form as well: the ethnos which penetrated into Western Asia from the north in the 7th century BC – which should be identified with the Pontic Scythians on the basis of varied evidence – was referred to in the ancient Eastern texts as “*Is-gu-za-ai*” or “*As-gu-za-ai*”, which is indisputably identical to the Greek “*Skythai*”, i.e. Scythians. The same root is also perceived in some proper names along the Northern Pontic coasts, dated to the Scythian period.

A comparison of all these data justifies the conclusion that the name “Scythians” was given exclusively to the population along the Northern Pontic coast. It is precisely these people that the Greeks met earlier than the other ethnic communities in the steppe belt of Eurasia, hence in Greek tradition the name of this ethnos has adopted the character of a generalizing term to designate a large group of steppe tribes and peoples, in addition to its concrete historical content. These tribes and peoples indeed had many common cultural features with the Scythians, some of them were even ethnically related to them, but nevertheless these were different ethnic communities and they never called themselves Scythians.

Scythians will be referred to in this book in the proper, concrete historical meaning of that concept, i.e. the ethnos that lived in the Northern Pontic steppes

in the period between the 7th and the 3rd century BC (and in the early stages of its evolution apparently in the Fore-Caucasus as well). That was a powerful agglomeration of several nomadic and agricultural tribes, in which the nomadic tribe of the Royal Scythians had a dominant position (it seems that precisely they were the original bearers of the self-appellation “*Skythai* or *Skolotoi*”). In the course of time, the Scythian alliance of tribes grew into an early state formation. In the 7th and early 6th century BC, the Scythians undertook a series of devastating campaigns into the ancient Eastern lands: they took part in the crushing of Assyria, sowed fear in Mydia and even reached Egypt. Later, towards the end of the 6th century BC, the Scythians themselves were attacked by an awesome adversary: they had to repulse the incursion of the Persian troops led by king Darius – an attack that did not bring success to the Persians and ended with their expulsion from Scythia. In the 5th-4th century BC Scythia experienced a period of most active flourishing, evidenced by the big tumuli that still rise in the Pontic steppes – monumental tombs of Scythian kings and of representatives of the higher aristocracy. In the 3rd century BC the Scythian kingdom started to decline gradually and in the 2nd century BC it failed to resist the pressure of the Sarmatian tribes that had come from the east, from Tanaïs, thus actually it stopped existing as a big and powerful state, while the Late Scythian kingdom survived until the 3rd century BC only on the territory along the Lower Dniepr and in the steppes of Crimea. Later, under the pressure of new tribes which settled along the Northern Black Sea coasts, the Scythians disappeared altogether from the historical scene during the time of the Great Migration of Peoples. Such is the brief outline of the political history of those people, whose mythology will be the object of our attention in this book.



What sources can serve as the basis for studying Scythian mythology and above all its narrative texture, i.e. the Scythian myths in the real sense of that term? In the most ancient stages in the history of mankind myths lived only in the oral tradition. Later, with the appearance of writing and literature, this tradition was complemented by the existence of written fixations, the myth entered the literature, which guaranteed its preservation for centuries, long after the people who had generated it had disappeared. However, throughout their entire history, the Scythians were a non-literary society, hence there are no authentic records of Scythian myths, created by the actual carriers of the tradition of interest to us. The practically complete disappearance of the Scythians from the historical scene resulted in the discontinuation of the Scythian mythical and epic tradition as well. Indeed, specialists believe that in the Nart epic tradition of the Ossets from the Northern Caucasus it is possible to identify a layer whose origin can be traced back to the Scythian period. Besides, a certain Scythian component probably took part in the ethnogenesis of the Ossetic people. However, the Sarmatae – another ancient ethnos from the steppes of Eastern Europe, related to the Scythians, but nevertheless with a slightly different culture – played a considerably greater role for the differentiation of the Ossetic people than the Scythians. It is practically impossible to differentiate between the Scythian and the Sarmatian element in the Ossetic folklore heritage, all the more that it had been exposed to other cultural traditions as well, hence the Nart epos should not be examined as a cultural phenomenon which had preserved Scythian folklore for us in a relatively complete form.

From everything stated so far it is evident that modern scholars cannot consider Scythian mythology as something given. In order to subject this mythology

to a comprehensive analysis and to use it as an instrument for understanding Scythian culture as a whole, it is necessary first of all to *reconstruct* the mythology of the Scythians. The character of this book has been prompted largely by that circumstance: instead of a consistent presentation of Scythian myths, the reader will find here a description of the process of their genesis and reproduction, and will be able to judge to what extent the proposed reconstruction is convincing.

This reconstruction is based on various indirect sources, a considerable part of which are not of Scythian origin, but belong to other cultures. Ancient literary sources feature most prominently in this respect. After the 7th century BC, many Greek colonies cropped up along the Northern Pontic coasts, in immediate proximity to the territories inhabited by the Scythians. For many centuries the life of these cities was closely related to the local tribes, hence abundant and varied evidence about the Scythians penetrated the Greek environment and was reflected in the works of the ancient writers. Among them there were stories which can be traced back to the Scythian myths. The ancient authors presented them differently. Sometimes we see a fragment of a narrative nature that has been expanded to a greater or lesser extent, having preserved the structure of the Scythian original, on other occasions in the descriptive texts – geographic, ethnographic, etc. – there are isolated references to some mythological characters and fragmentary evidence about realia and notions associated with them. Often even the Greek or Roman author who had preserved for us some message of this kind, was not aware that he was actually reproducing evidence of a mythological nature, but perceived it rather as a description of Scythian reality. Naturally, by far not the whole Scythian mythology, with its entire wealth of images, scenes and stories, was reflected in



the ancient literature. Besides, if we recall what a large part of that literature has not survived to our days, it becomes obvious that on the basis of these sources it would be possible to reconstruct only a very limited number of the Scythian myths. However, it is perfectly natural that the ancient authors fixed in their writings predominantly Scythian myths that had a leading role in the cultural life of Scythia. Hence the great importance of the available sources.

After we select from the whole fund of ancient evidence about the Scythians those fragments which most probably originated from Scythian mythology, it would be necessary to check in them the accuracy of the content of the Scythian myths – after all, the authors of the works used belonged to the non-Scythian cultural tradition and they could distort that content and the meaning of the narratives they heard either voluntarily or involuntarily. Most essential for such a verification would be the objects of art and above all the images and scenes which reproduce some episodes from the Scythian myths, or at least some of their prominent figures, with their characteristic and easily identifiable iconographic features. But this faces us with another difficulty.

The trouble is that the Scythians were virtually unfamiliar with pictorial art in the real meaning of this term. Throughout the entire Scythian history, Scythian culture was dominated by the so-called “animal style” in art, i.e. specifically stylized images of certain animals, rendered in strictly canonic postures. Naturally, this art is connected with the mythological notions of the Scythians and their semantic value will be discussed again later in this book. The semantics itself can be understood only on the basis of sufficient knowledge about the Scythian mythological picture of the world, but nevertheless this art cannot be used as a source for initial familiarization with Scythian my-

thology, and even less with its narrative aspects.

It was only in the 4th century BC that anthropomorphic images of the mythical figures began to appear in the art of the Scythians, to a great extent under the influence of the artistic culture of the Greeks. However, the repertory of such images was extremely poor, the craftsmanship of the execution too primitive and they were not very informative in the aspects of interest to us. Therefore, much more attention should be given to another category of monuments of art originating from the Scythian tumuli, namely the objects of the so-called Graeco-Scythian art.

These were objects that had the traditional forms for Scythia, but they were made by Greek – not local – artists and craftsmen, and were decorated with scenes that were Greek interpretations of Scythian scenes. These images are of indisputable interest for us in the context of the theme discussed. With all the artistic skills inherent to Greek anthropomorphic art from the ages of the Late Classicism and Early Hellenism, the artists and the goldsmiths succeeded in decorating the small surface of precious vessels, the small gold appliqué or the object from among the individual articles of adornment with an exquisitely balanced multi-figure composition or even with a series of successive “episodes” which present the fabula in its evolution. The first finds of such objects of art appeared more than 150 years ago and their ever-growing collection adorns many museums on the territory of the former Soviet Union. The masterpieces in this series have always attracted the attention of specialists and they serve as the object of different studies. However, one of the key issues – about the meaning of the images decorating these objects of art – has remained debatable to this day.

These compositions were most frequently referred to as “scenes from the



life of the Scythians" and this name reflects their prevailing interpretation as something like scenes from everyday life. Some of them reflect scenes from the military life of the Scythians, other scenes are from their economic activities. The reason for their emergence is considered to be the "ethnographic interests" of the Greeks and the attention they devoted to Scythian exotic realia. However, such an interpretation comes up against many rather unsurmountable barriers.

It is interesting to note above all the uniqueness of this Graeco-Scythian series in the total repertory of Greek artistic crafts. Why were such "ethnographic interests" totally lacking in the works of those Greek craftsmen who offered their services at other "barbaric" markets, e.g. the Thracian one? Among the numerous Greek objects discovered in Thracian archaeological monuments there is not a single one decorated with some "scene from the life of the Thracians" that could be considered to be some analogy to the Scythian monuments of interest to us. Such "ethnographic sketches" are likewise lacking in the other parts of the periphery of the ancient world. Moreover, it is hardly a coincidence that such scenes decorated objects that had precisely Scythian forms, i.e. forms typical of the local Pontic culture. It is perfectly obvious that in the concrete case we are dealing with objects that fulfil the orders of the consumer environment. What is more, these objects were most frequently used not in everyday life but for ritual purposes, e.g. cult vessels or the official weapons worn by the Scythian chieftains. Scythian ritual practice would hardly have endorsed objects decorated with images which are deprived of sacral content (from a Scythian point of view), whose choice would have been prompted exclusively by the preferences of the Greek artist or craftsman.

And finally, it should be borne in

mind that over the past years many specialists have discovered cases of direct coincidence between the content of such compositions and fragments of Scythian myths or descriptions of Scythian rituals, preserved by the ancient authors, which finally confirmed the religious and mythological character of these compositions. In the light of these data it seems feasible that the remaining images in the cited series were also similar. With such compositions the Greek artists probably responded to the existing demand in the Scythian environment for such images and scenes with a mythological content – a demand which Scythian craftsmen were unable to meet for lack of pictorial tradition in their culture. However, if Graeco-Scythian works of art are approached from such a starting point, their content would become a particularly valuable source for reconstructing Scythian narrative mythology. In combination with the mentioned fragments of Scythian myths, which have survived to our days in the works of the ancient authors, they make possible the reconstruction of a large part of the fabula range of these myths and of their narrative texture.

However, as was pointed out already, this narrative mythology of the Scythians is of interest to us not only in itself, but also as a way of expressing the mythological model of the world, which is inherent to Scythian culture. Therefore, the next stage in our reconstruction should be the comparison of the structures incarnated in the myths which have been reconstructed as described earlier, with structures revealed in another type of works of art, also called upon to model the Universe. Such a comprehensive study of the structural configurations, expressed both as narrative myths and as symbolic non-narrative "texts" (in the sense attributed to this term in semiotics – the science of the sign systems), would allow to construct a comprehensive picture of the world outlook of the



Scythians, which is based on mythological thinking.

The interpretation of material which is so diverse and often fragmentary with the aim of reconstructing the mythological perceptions about the world behind it requires a certain caution. In order to avoid arbitrary interpretations, no work of art and no fact should be examined out of context and isolated from all relations which characterize them. The reconstruction of Scythian mythology rules out any "linearity", i.e. the type of research when an isolated fact serves as the basis for the interpretation of another fact, which in turn serves as the basis for the next interpretation. It is necessary to correlate constantly the different data which form the intricate network of arguments and rule out any arbitrariness of the proposed interpretation. This circumstance determines the structure of the present book to a certain extent. It is necessary to go back time and again to material that has already been discussed, in order to check conclusions already obtained with a view to newly-obtained data, and to clarify how they agree with the proposed interpretation of other Scythian ancient monuments.

Analogies should inevitably play an important role in this complex system of arguments. Naturally, however, they cannot be isolated and examined out of context. It is important to know where these analogies have been borrowed from, what cultural arsenal they belong to and how justified it is to recruit them for the interpretation of Scythian materials. In this connection we shall dwell on two things.

The investigation of different mythological traditions, undertaken in recent years by specialists on concrete ancient and traditional cultures, has demonstrated the extent to which these mythologies are characterized by concepts that are essentially globally disseminated, having been formed independently of one another within cultures that are not interrelated in any way, and neverthe-

less revealing a considerable similarity: the so-called mythological universalia. These comprise, e.g., the notions about the structure of space, the principal elements of the cosmological configurations, etc. Naturally, these notions have found their specific reflection both in the plot of the myth and in the varied symbolic codes. However, the interpretation of mythological monuments should take into consideration the essential unity of the semantics, especially in the cases when only fragmentary data are available, as in Scythia.

Another way of interpreting these data is through information borrowed from traditions related to the one investigated. The origin of mythology can be traced far back to the remotest antiquity, and the ethnic communities of a common origin inevitably reveal elements of a common cultural heritage that had been formed in the time preceding their splitting. Of course, the future fate of that heritage differs for each ethnos, but the discovering of the deep, ancient common layer helps understand the intrinsic semantics of many features in the culture of each of them. Which traditions can be considered to be most closely related to the Scythian tradition, whose cultural heritage has a common origin with that of the Scythians?

The fact that the Scythians were a non-literary society, which was mentioned already, deprives us of the chance to learn something about their language. Nevertheless, individual words (mainly proper nouns) which have been preserved in the foreign sources, mainly Greek and Latin, allow to identify the group to which this language belonged, and hence to show which ancient and contemporary peoples may be considered to be particularly close to the Scythians ethnogenetically. The studies of several generations of linguists have proved reliably that the Scythian language belonged to the Eastern Iranian languages which formed a part of the Iranian branch



of the Indo-Iranian group of the Indo-European family. Incidentally, the culture (and mythology) of the peoples belonging to the Indo-Iranian group is known to have many common elements, attributed to the period of their existence together, i.e. to the so-called Proto-Aryan period. Even the Indo-Aryans, on the one hand, and the Iranians, on the other, i.e. ethnic massifs which are known to have been among the first to split, share mythological images and figures, sometimes even bearing the same names, as well as identical mythological plots and notions. It is even more probable to discover such a common heritage in the different Indo-Iranian traditions, to which the Scythian tradition belongs. Incidentally, the mythology of the ancient Indo-Aryans and of the Western Iranians was much better preserved than Scythian mythology, their mythological plots and the semantics of their images are much more familiar to us. Hence it is perfectly justifiable to refer to different Indo-Iranian traditions for the interpretation of the Scythian mythological material. It is only necessary to try not to substitute this material and its specificity with data borrowed from related traditions, but to use precisely that material as the basis for the reconstruction.

Undoubtedly, many things in such a reconstruction would be hypothetical. Specialists have different views on many issues. However, the broader the scope of data adduced, the lesser the probability of alternative interpretations of any fact, which would be equally convincingly in agreement with the interpretations of all other data.

Consequently, ensuing from the achievements of modern research in the domain of the comparative investigation of the mythological heritage of different peoples and studying on this basis the Scythian narrative mythology in its entirety, as it has been reconstructed from fragments preserved in ancient authors, and from the works of art, as well as

from monuments of a diverse nature, which reflect the same typically Scythian mythological world outlook, we can form a sufficiently full idea about the mythology of these people, as a comprehensive and consistent system that had determined Scythian culture as a whole. This constitutes the main objective pursued in the present book.

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A few words about the accumulation of the material which is the object of the present research. The first steps in the study of the history and culture of the Scythians were made exclusively on the basis of an analysis of the evidence in the ancient tradition. That was also the basis for the 18th century authors who attempted to create a generalizing history of the peoples inhabiting the present-day territories of Russia during the antiquity, who therefore had contacts with the Scythians. The insufficiently critical approach to these sources was largely responsible for the superficial and schematic character of the constructs contained in these works. Without seeking the correlation between these and other types of data, these studies cannot be elevated to a new level.

The beginning of the subsequent stage in the research on the Scythians can be dated to 1763, when the so-called Litoi Kurgan, containing a rich burial, was excavated near Elisavetgrad. This tumulus is sometimes called Melgunov's barrow after General Melgunov who was in charge of the excavations. Even then the tumulus was interpreted as containing the burial of a rich Scythian chieftain. The objects found in it, clearly bearing traces of the influence of the culture of the Middle East, are dated to the early Scythian period, and Melgunov's barrow has remained to this day one of the oldest rich Scythian complexes known to us.

Owing to chance circumstances, a number of brilliant Scythian finds were unearthed during subsequent decades.



For example, in 1821 sailors working in a stone quarry near the town of Kerch (ancient Pantikapaion) came across an ancient tomb below a tumulus, in which they found different precious objects. The finds were given to the sea officer Patiniotti, and this monument is known in the specialized literature under his name. Unfortunately, only drawings of the objects found in the tomb have survived to our times, the most important among them being a figurine of a male Scythian.

One of the most remarkable Scythian burial complexes, the Kul-Oba kurgan, to which we shall refer many times in this book, was found under similar circumstances again near Kerch in 1830. Below the tumular embankment, which was built in the 4th century BC, there was a stone tomb containing a male and a female burial, as well as the burial of a servant. The grave goods in Kul-Oba astonish with the abundance of precious objects and with their high artistic craftsmanship. Having fallen into the hands of accidental diggers, the Kul-Oba finds were saved in their vast majority for future researchers owing to the efforts of P. Dubrux, a famous lover and connoisseur of ancient Pontic monuments, who has investigated them with great enthusiasm. The finds from this tumulus are kept today in the collection of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Planned exploration of the tumuli of the Scythian aristocracy along the Lower Dniepr started after the middle of the 19th century. Thus, for example, A. Tereshchenko and A. Lyuchenko excavated in 1852-1856 the Alexandropol Barrow (also known as Lugovaya Mogila), the largest of all known tumuli in Scythia. When discussing research conducted during that period, however, it is necessary to mention in the first place I. E. Zabelin, who devoted many years of his life to that work. In 1860 he excavated the Krasnokut barrow, in 1861 – the Slonovskaya Bliznitsa barrow, in 1865

– the Kozel tumulus, and in 1867-1868 – the Big Tsymbalka barrow. But his most remarkable discovery came from the excavations of the Chertomlyk tumulus in 1862-1863. Below the embankment of Chertomlyk the archaeologists found a catacomb with a complex configuration, which was probably built in two stages. In fact, these were two tumuli that merged after the dividing wall between them was destroyed. One of the tombs was intended for the burial of the king, the other one – for his wife. In addition to the royal burials, the tombs contain burials of a number of accompanying persons as well. Three smaller tumuli for the horses and another two for the grooms were localized separately. Although the monument was partially plundered already during the antiquity, the grave goods in the Chertomlyk tomb were unusually rich and extremely important with a view to the topic of interest to us.

Naturally, the excavations conducted by Zabelin and his contemporaries may evoke a number of serious reproaches from the point of view of modern methodology. Many specific features of the construction of the tombs, as well as details of the burial rites, proved to be insufficiently conscientiously studied, or not mentioned altogether. Besides, the tumular embankments have not been explored comprehensively. Nevertheless, the value of the excavated materials is indisputable and their importance grows with the years, because we acquire the possibility to consider these monuments from more and more new perspectives.

At the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century a whole new series of rich Scythian tumuli were excavated along the Dniepr river, the most important among them being Oguz, Chmyreva barrow, Deeviy barrow, etc. It is also necessary to mention in this context the excavations conducted in 1911-1912 by N. I. Vesselovskiy of the Solokha tumulus, which equals only Kul-



Oba and Chertomlyk in importance. Similar to Chertomlyk, it contained two burials, one of which – the central one – was actually totally plundered during the antiquity. The fully preserved lateral burial, however, has provided researchers with unique materials, including finds which are directly relevant to the topic of interest to us.

It is necessary to mention specifically the excavations of Early Scythian monuments along the Kuban river, notably the Kelermes and Ul'skiy barrows, the one near Kostromskaya, etc., carried out in the beginning of this century. Unfortunately, many of them have been explored very carelessly from a methodological point of view, as a result of which various valuable historical and historical-cultural evidence has been irretrievably lost. However, the extremely small number of known burials, dated to the early stages in Scythian history, has not allowed any Scythologist to ignore these materials. We, too, shall often refer to them.

So far we spoke predominantly about burials of the higher Scythian aristocracy, i.e. the so-called royal burials. There are two reasons for this. First, it was precisely these monuments which contained materials (more specifically objects of art) which are of interest from the point of view of studies on Scythian mythology. Second, it was again the tumuli belonging to this circle which were excavated before the October 1917 Revolution, because there were greater chances of discovering precious objects in them than in excavations of burials of the middle classes and the poor Scythians.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the importance of research on the ordinary burials as well, because they reproduce many aspects of life in Scythia. Therefore, Russian archaeologists have devoted special attention to them in recent years. Frontal exploration of many tombs, comprising sever-

al dozens of barrows each, were undertaken. In the course of these excavations sufficiently rich burials, containing important materials for us, have been discovered. To these one should attribute in the first place Gaymanova Mogila, explored by V.I. Bidzilya in 1969, and Tolstaya Mogila – excavated in 1971 by B.N. Mozolevskiy. The latter monument deserves special attention, because it contains unique finds which we shall discuss in considerable detail. Besides, it has been excavated at a rather high methodological level, which gives Scythologists information that has been hitherto inaccessible to them on the basis of the finds from other Scythian tumuli. Consequently, it will also be necessary to turn to the results of the exploration of the trench around this tumulus and to the remnants of a commemoration ceremony contained in it.

Excavations of other famous Scythian monuments were also conducted in the post-war years. Thus, for example, in 1954 A.I. Terenozhkin explored the royal tumulus near the town of Melitopol, in 1959 V.P. Shilov investigated the Five Brothers tumular group, which is a part of the Elizavetinskaya necropolis along the lower Don. Interesting results have been obtained recently in the work of Ukrainian archaeologists studying Chertomlyk, Oguz and other barrows, which had not been excavated completely in the past century.

All that field work, carried out for about 200 years already, guaranteed the accumulation of the richest collection of Scythian works of art in the museums of the former USSR, and it is practically impossible even to start talking about the mythology of the Scythians without having studied them in detail. Many generations of Scythologists devoted their life to that research and the present book which is offered to the attention of the readers is largely based on their work.



# The Scythian Pantheon

The pantheon of every religious-mythological system – the group of individual deities making up this system, organized in a concrete way – may be studied from different perspectives. The attention of researchers is most often attracted by the place of one figure or another in the hierarchy of religious worship, the degree of the influence on the life of the community, attributed to it, the relative share of the rites, sacrifices, etc., connected with it, in the sum total of ritual acts of the community in question. According to these criteria, the deities are divided into “supreme” and “secondary”. Viewed from this perspective, the pantheon studied is a rather variable and dynamic system, the position of any element (i.e. deity) in it may change depending on the specificities of each stage in the history of the community worshipping these deities: on the changes in the environmental conditions of its existence, on the relative share of one occupation or another in the system of its economic activities, or on the level of its social development. This pantheon may also comprise new deities that have been borrowed from some other cultural tradition. With such an approach, we obtain information not so much about the mythology, but rather more about the religion of the investigated community.

The other approach is purely mythological. Each deity is of interest to us for the element of the Universe which it incarnates and for its correlation with the other elements in the picture of the world. The pantheon understood in this sense is a stable system which models the structure of the Cosmos according to the notions of the carriers of the respective culture. This system is connected most closely with the narrative mythology, because both have identical functions. The pantheon of the Scythians evokes interest precisely from these perspectives.

It would hardly have been possible



to form a sufficiently comprehensive and clear notion about the Scythian pantheon as an integral system based on the fragmentary and brief references to the deities worshipped by the Scythians in the works of the ancient authors. Fortunately, a special passage is devoted to this problem in the *Scythian Logos* of Herodotus (IV, 59), where evidence that is not known from other authors is given. According to the Greek historian, the Scythians "worshipped only the following gods: Hestia above all, then Zeus and Gaia, accepting the latter as the wife of Zeus, then Apollo, Aphrodite Urania, Ares and Herakles. These gods are worshipped by all Scythians, while the so-called Royal Scythians offered sacrifices to Poseidon as well."

In accordance with the prevalent tradition in the ancient world, here the Scythian deities appear with Greek names. The meaning of this identification is that by operating with images that are familiar to the Greek audience, the functions of the alien deities and their mythological essence can be made more accessible and understandable. However, Herodotus, who was very careful when describing the "barbaric cultures", did not restrict himself to such an identification only and cited also the local Scythian names of almost all deities: "Hestia in Scythian is called Tabiti, Zeus is Papaïos, perfectly correctly in my opinion, Gaia – Api, Apollo – Goitosyros, Aphrodite Urania is called Argimpasa, Poseidon – Thagimasadas." This additional information is very important to us, because the ancient names of the gods always had a definite meaning which corresponded to their mythological nature, hence by clarifying the etymology of the theonyms it would be possible to add substantial new data to our notions about Scythian mythology. Unfortunately, these names – so incomprehensible to the Greeks and so unusual to Greek ears – were often incorrectly transcribed, and subsequent scribes distort-

ed them beyond recognition. Therefore, the same names look different in the different manuscripts of the cited work of Herodotus, which have survived to our days, not to mention other sources, therefore we cannot always succeed in deciding which form is the most correct one and renders more accurately the sounds of the Scythian names. All this complicates the correct identification of the etymology of the names. For example, the name of the "Scythian Apollo" has survived to our times not only with the form "Goitosyros" but also as "Oitosyros", for the name of the "Scythian Aphrodite Urania" the forms "Artimpasa" and "Aripasa" coexisted with the more widespread form "Argimpasa", while the form "Thagimasadas" is a rather unreliable reconstruction.

It would be extremely important to find out the origin of the cited passage in Herodotus about the Scythian pantheon. Was it created by the historian himself on the basis of an integral interpretation of the existing evidence that he himself had gathered from various places and under different circumstances, or was it borrowed directly from the Scythian environment in such a complete form? Some evidence allows us to give an answer to this question.

The specialist on Iranian studies, V.I. Abaev, devoted particular attention to the circumstance that if one rules out Thagimasadas-Poseidon, who was worshipped by the Royal Scythians only, according to Herodotus the number of the deities worshipped by all Scythians was precisely seven. Heptatheism was known to be a stable specificity of the religious and mythological notions of the Indo-Iranians. For example, such was the initial number of the Aditi – the leading deities in the mythology of the ancient Vedic Aryans. There is evidence that the Alans, one of the Iranian-speaking steppe peoples from the Sarmatian circle, also worshipped seven deities. Traces of the same tradition have been preserved in



the ethnography of the Ossetic people. And finally, Zoroastrianism – the religion of the ancient Iranians, which had transformed substantially the original Indo-Iranian notions, while at the same time having inherited many things from it – involved worship of seven Amesha Spenta, led by the supreme deity Ahuramazda. Hence it may be concluded that the number of Scythian deities, mentioned by Herodotus and reflecting the ancient traditions of the ethnic and cultural massif to which the Scythians belonged, was not at all accidental.

A second important specificity of the passage of interest to us is the circumstance that it cites in the first place Tabiti – the “Scythian Hestia”. In Greece during the classical period, Hestia was perceived mainly as the goddess of the hearth in the home and she did not play a major role in theology and mythology. However, a comparative-historical study of this image reveals that it is based on the ancient fire god of all Indo-Europeans, which in the mythology of the Indo-Aryans is paralleled by the god Agni, and in the Iranian world – by Atar. It is important in this case that the Greeks identified the fire worshipped by the Iranians again with Hestia. The stable ancient Greek tradition in which every sacrificial rite starts and ends with the sacrifice to be offered to Hestia, and each appeal to the gods starts by mentioning her name, finds a direct analogy in the Vedic arias: here the mentioning of the gods is a canonical element; even the *Rigveda* starts with a hymn to Agni and ends with a hymn addressed to that deity. It is possible to assume common roots of this practice also in the most ancient Indo-European ritual and its reflection may be considered to be the placing of Tabiti in the beginning of Herodotus’ description of the Scythian pantheon.

Even these two specificities of this description, which correlate well with the evidence about the different Indo-

Iranian traditions, suggest that the structure of the cited passage by Herodotus was not accidental. This allows us to see in it not the findings of the Greek historian, but a sufficiently accurate reproduction of some Scythian text, e.g. of a ritual formula pronounced during sacrifices or during sacral acts. Therefore, attention should be paid here not only to each deity, considered individually, the meaning of his or her name and the significance of the identification with the respective Greek deity, but also the structure of the passage as a whole. For example, three “levels” can be clearly identified in the pantheon described by Herodotus: Hestia-Tabiti is worshipped “higher than the rest” or “above the rest”, “besides that” or “after that” – Zeus and Gaia, “after them” or “later” – the remaining four deities. It is interesting to trace the sequence with which the deities have been listed and their grouping at the cited levels. The comprehensive analysis of these features should give an idea about the main figures of Scythian mythology.

Something has been said already about the Scythian goddess Tabiti, who was ranked in first position. Specialists in Iranian studies have proposed a convincing etymology of her name: “warming” or “flaming”. This etymology correlates well both with the identification of this deity with the Greek Hestia, and with her prime position in the Scythian pantheon, corresponding to the Indo-Iranian tradition. It also confirms the interpretation of Tabiti as a fire deity. The closest analogy of her name can be found in the name of the Old-Indic epic figure Tapati, the beautiful daughter of the Sun God, whose body was brilliant like fire, and who was basically a mythical image. The same root can be traced in the Old-Indic concept of *tapas*, meaning cosmic warmth, original nature, the universal cosmic principle from which both the various elements of the Universe and order in the world as a whole



originate. This notion is also similar to the mythology of the Vedic Agni, i.e. of the fire which can be found simultaneously in all zones of the Cosmos, permeating the whole Universe, the world of human beings and the world of the gods. Fire in the ancient Iranian mythology is also ubiquitous in character. According to the notions of the ancient Indo-Iranians, fire is primary and universal, an all-encompassing element of the Universe. Is this not the meaning of the dominating position of Tabiti in the Scythian pantheon, where she is alone at the first divine level?

Very interesting in this context is the story of the Roman author Pompeius Trogus about the dispute between Scythians and Egyptians for the right to be considered the most ancient people (Justin, II, 1). The argument of both sides in this dispute is the notion about the initial time in the world: whether it was when fire reigned over all the Earth or when it was entirely flooded by water. In fact, the alternative here is between the two prime elements of Nature. In Scythian mythology water indeed appears to be one of the primary elements. Therefore, it may be assumed that this passage by Pompeius Trogus echoes his knowledge of some Scythian mythological concepts. This is also in confirmation of the proposed interpretation of Tabiti's image as an incarnation of the primordial element.

This goddess has been referred to reliably in only one other source: in the description given by Herodotus of the war between Scythians and Persians (IV, 127). The Scythian king Idanthyrsos, outraged by Darius' claims to call himself his master, replied to him angrily: "I recognize as my masters only Zeus, my progenitor, and Hestia – the Queen of the Scythians." The Scythian Zeus-Papaïos was indeed worshipped as the progenitor of the dynasty of the Scythian kings. But what is the meaning of the qualification of Tabiti-Hestia as the

"Queen of the Scythians"? Does this simply reflect her supremacy over the remaining Scythian gods, a higher position in the Scythian pantheon or some specific link of that figure with the institution of the royal power? Evidence in support of the last hypothesis seems to be contained in another passage in Herodotus (IV, 68): when Scythians pronounce their most solemn oath, they swear in the royal Hestia; a false oath of this kind inflicted a grave illness on the Scythian king. The difficulty in the interpretation of this information stems from the fact that in Greek the word *hestia* means at the same time "hearth" and the name of the goddess. From the text of Herodotus it is impossible to clarify unambiguously whether the oath in question was before the royal hearths (which is the most common translation of this passage) or before that goddess whose image we are analysing here. The choice between the different interpretations depends on the understanding of the general mythological context, but each interpretation should also explain the mysterious plurality of the "royal Hestia". Further below, we shall return to the explanation of all these features.

Another interesting specificity of the Scythian fire deity is that it appears in a female hypostasis, while in the other Indo-Iranian traditions the fire god is, as a rule, a male figure. On the other hand, in Greek and Roman mythology this deity has a female image (the goddess Hestia-Vesta), whose direct influence on Scythia is highly unlikely. The female nature of Tabiti is most frequently explained by the presence of some anachronisms from the earlier matriarchate, although such an explanation is hardly satisfactory in the light of the latest studies on the social history and culture of the early communities; no direct dependence is observed between the social organization of the community and the relative share of the male and female images in its mythology. At this



stage it is not possible to explain convincingly the origin of the cited peculiarity of the Scythian pantheon.

The marital couple Zeus-Papaïos and Gaia-API represents the second "level" of the Scythian deities. Herodotus accompanies the information about the Scythian name of the first of them with the rather enigmatic comment that he is called Papaïos "perfectly correctly, in my opinion." How can one interpret such an evaluation of the alien name, in a foreign language and hence incomprehensible? Most scholars believe that Herodotus perceived in it a similarity with the word *papa* (father), which was used in the Greek language as well, and noted that this name fully corresponded to the function of that deity in Scythian mythology, where he indeed played the role of the progenitor of the other deities and of the entire Scythian ethnos. As regards the Scythian meaning of the name Papaïos, the opinions of specialists diverge: some interpret it as meaning "father", others attribute it to the Iranian term meaning "guardian" or "protector". The existing evidence prevents any preference to be given to one interpretation or another.

Herodotus compares the wife of Papaïos with the Greek Gaia, i.e. with the Earth goddess as an element that generates everything. However, the name of that goddess – API – stems most probably from the Iranian word meaning "water" and at a first glance it does not correspond fully to Herodotus' identification. However, this controversy is only ostensible. In different ancient cosmologies Earth and water are actually two substances of the same element which incarnates the lower zone of the Universe, the birth-giving chthonic principle. Such a biunity is also characteristic of the goddesses of ancient Iran. In the next chapter we shall see that Scythian tradition depicted the mythical progenitress precisely in the same way, i.e. as an aqueous-terrestrial deity.

Such an interpretation of the nature of the goddess API sheds light on the meaning of the image of her divine husband as well. The ancient motif of the marriage between Heaven and Earth as an act that marks the beginning of the Universe persists in the mythologies of different Indo-European peoples. More specifically, such is the mythology of the Greek Gaia whose marriage to Uranos (heaven) gave birth to different elements of the Universe and to the deities belonging to the younger generation. The husband of the "Scythian Gaia", Papaïos, was probably perceived as the incarnation of Heaven. Indeed, Herodotus identifies him with Zeus and not with Uranos, but this is a perfectly natural substitution for the Greek mythological understanding of the world during the classical period. It was prompted by the highest position which Zeus occupied in the hierarchy of the Greek gods. A direct parallel of such an interpretation can also be found in another passage by Herodotus: in describing the religion of the Persians, the historian also stressed the resemblance between their supreme deity and the Olympic Zeus, noting moreover that they used the name Zeus to denote the entire firmament.

Hence, the married couple Heaven and Earth (water) marks the second level of the Scythian pantheon. The evidence of the different Indo-European traditions suggests that they were perceived as existing initially in an indissoluble unity, then they were divided by the "middle world" born from their union, i.e. the air space, the zone inhabited by man and by all other mortal and material creatures. This marked the end of the process of cosmogenesis, of the creation of an ordered Universe, consisting of three spatial zones situated one above the other.

Examining the description which Herodotus gives of the Scythian pantheon through the prism of such cosmogenic notions, we see that each "level" in



this pantheon corresponds to a concrete stage in the creation of the Universe: at first only the primordial fire existed, being identical to the cosmic warmth of the Vedic mythology; after it – and probably from it – sprang Heaven and Earth (water), initially bound together in marriage that had to be destroyed subsequently when the “middle world” was created. Such an interpretation allows to assume that the Scythian deities from the third “level” should be associated precisely with that world, which is the product of the last stage of cosmogenesis. To what extent can one find confirmation for this assumption in the concrete evidence about these deities?

Above all, it is interesting to note the number of deities at the third level – four, as we have seen already. Incidentally, the terrestrial, i.e. the material world is usually presented in the various mythological traditions as being quadrangular and having four sides. The notion of the four sides of the world, of the four radial coordinates as a structural characteristic of space, is a mandatory feature of all ancient cosmologies and modern geography has inherited it from them. The manifestations of that notion in Scythian culture will be discussed in the next chapters of the book.

Each of the four sides of the world has its symbols in the mythological picture of the Universe. For example, in many traditions it is correlated with some deity: the Old-Indic Lokapalas – the guardian gods of the directions of the horizon, who were initially only four in number. The semantics of each of the deities belonging to the Lokapali was very complex: they had their “spheres of action”, in addition to the quadripartite structure of interest to us. For example, the guardian of the South, Yama, was the ruler over the world of the dead ancestors; the guardian of the East, Indra, was the king of the gods and the incarnation of the “middle world” as a whole. However, in their aggregate, they

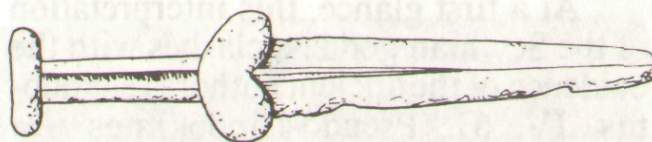
were precisely an incarnation of the quadrilateral space of the middle cosmic zone.

Let us see now whether the link of the four Scythian deities from the third “level” can be felt. This link is most clearly manifested in the data on the “Scythian Ares” that have survived to our days. Herodotus does not mention his local name, which makes the interpretation of this image rather difficult. To compensate for this omission, he gives a detailed description of the rites connected with the worshipping of that deity, which is a unique case in the information about the Scythians that can be found in the ancient tradition. According to Herodotus (IV, 62), in each area of Scythia dry branches and twigs were used to build an enormous sacrificial place with a quadrangular platform on top, which was accessible from only one side, the other three sides being vertical. An ancient iron sword – *akinakes* (Fig. 1) – was thrust in the middle of that platform and served as the incarnation or image of that deity. Scythians offered each hundredth captive soldier as a sacrifice to this sword, pouring his blood over the worshipped sword and throwing high into the air his right arm, severed together with the shoulder.

The worshipping of the “Scythian Ares”, as it appears from the cited description, betrays the dual nature of that deity. On the one hand, the blood sacrifices of captives and the fact that the god himself was rendered as a sword, indisputably suggest that this was a military deity, hence it is no accident that Herodotus identified him with the Greek Ares and later authors with Mars. Traces of this Scythian cult were preserved for a long time in the folklore of the Iranian-speaking peoples of Eastern Europe. One of the main characters in the Ossetic Nartic epos is the brave but rather unbridled warrior Batraz, who acted many times as a protector of his compatriots from various enemies. He was



Fig. 1. Scythian sword (*akinakes*)



made of hardened steel and was most closely bound to his sword: he was immortal until his sword was unbroken. This has led researchers to the logical conclusion that in the concrete case the sword was nothing but the incarnation of the hero himself. There is an opinion that both the Scythian Ares and the Ossetic Batraz were identical to the ancient Iranian war-god Vrtragna.

On the other hand, the quadrangular shape of the sacrificial altar of this Scythian deity, taken by itself, is directly related to the quadrilateral structure of space characterized above, whereas the sword thrust into the centre of this sacrificial altar was one of the incarnations of the world's axis which models the vertical structure of the Universe and links its three zones. In this way, the altar of the "Scythian Ares" is simply a model of the Universe, moreover predominantly of its middle zone – the air space. Apparently, the way in which sacrifices were offered to that deity – by throwing severed arms high into the air – was also connected with that function of the god.

The "successor" of the Scythian god – the Ossetic Batraz – also inhabited the air space and often acquired the image of the devastating whirlwind. And finally, we shall adduce here the evidence of the Greek author Lukianos, who was well familiar with the realia of Scythian culture and probably had first-hand knowledge of many motifs of Scythian folklore. In one of his works devoted to Scythian themes (*Toxaris*, 38) he reports that the Scythians worshipped the Wind and the Sword as gods. Indeed, these images seem to be opposed: the first one is a source of life, while the second one brings death. However, the very fact of their juxtaposing was hardly accidental. It suggests rather

er that this passage reflects a certain ambivalence of the unified Scythian image. What is more, researchers have drawn attention to the fact that the actual shaping of the tip and of the hilt of the ancient sword definitely resembles a phallus. Thus, this lethal weapon simultaneously acquires the form of a life-giving organ, which is an illustration of the discussed ambivalence.

Consequently, the analysis of the first of the deities of the Scythian tetrad from the lower level of the pantheon seems to confirm his specific links with the middle zone of the Cosmos.

Let us consider now the image of the goddess identified by Herodotus with Aphrodite Urania. As was mentioned already, her Scythian name is given different renderings in the sources. The most widespread form is "Argimpasa" and then the etymology of that name is unclear. However, if we prefer the form "Artimpasa" (incidentally, it has been attested not only in manuscripts but on lapidary inscriptions as well), the first part of that theonym would prove to be identical to the name of the ancient Iranian deity Arti (later form Asi). This is the only instance of coincidence between the name of the Scythian deity and a character from another tradition using the Iranian language. Arti incarnates the material wealth that is accessible to people in its various manifestations: from the flocks and herds of domestic animals through various precious objects to abundant progeny. As a whole, the name Artimpasa is interpreted as someone "looking after Arti." The goddess grants material wealth and welfare. In this context it is quite understandable that the goddess was associated with the Greek Aphrodite Urania – the divine patron of the generating forces in the material world.



At a first glance, this interpretation of the Scythian goddess clashes with the evidence of the ancient authors (Herodotus, IV, 67; Pseudo-Hippokrates, *De aere*, 30) about her *enarees*, i.e. people who have lost their manhood but have received a prophetic talent in exchange. The emphasized sterility of these people seems to correlate poorly with the interpretation of their protecting goddess, who is connected explicitly with the life-giving beginning. However, Herodotus (I, 105) explains that the “woman’s disease” was sent by Aphrodite Urania as a punishment to those Scythians who plundered her temple in Askalon during their marches into Western Asia. The belief of the Scythians in the “divine origin” of that disease is mentioned in Pseudo-Hippokrates as well. Thus, the story about the *enarees* only confirms the interpretation cited above: this disease was perceived by the Scythians as a form of expiation of the sacrilege and it affected precisely that sphere for which the offended goddess was responsible.

The markedly corporal and material nature of the functions of the Scythian Artimpasa correlates well with her place in the divine tetrad – the middle world.

Very little is known about the third deity in this group, the “Scythian Apollo”. As was pointed out already, his name was rendered differently in the various manuscripts and it lacked a universally accepted and convincing etymology, only in its second part the Iranian *sura*, meaning “powerful”, is identifiable with a greater or lesser degree of certainty. There is also very little information in the identification of that deity with Apollo in view of the extreme polyfunctionality and complexity of the Greek god. The most frequent assumptions are about his solar nature and more specifically about his identification with the Iranian Mithras; but this is only a hypothesis, which is not based on extensive argumentation and is not subjected to verification from different perspectives, due to scanty evidence.

Even less information can be gleaned from the description given by Herodotus of the last deity in the Scythian pantheon, because the historian – as in the case with “Ares” – has not even mentioned the Scythian name of that deity, simply referring to him as “Herakles”. The image of this hero in the Greek tradition is so diverse and complex that it is absolutely impossible to reconstruct the nature of the Scythian deity identified with it on that basis. However, here we are aided by another source: the Scythian myth with “Herakles” as one of the leading *dramatis personae*, which has been narrated in sufficient detail by the ancient authors. Before starting to analyse it, it is necessary to devote some attention to the deity mentioned by Herodotus at the end of his description of the Scythian pantheon, identifying him with the Greek Poseidon.

This character is apparently far from Herodotus’ description: he transcends the structure of heptatheism which is traditional for the Indo-Iranians, moreover – according to the evidence given by Herodotus himself – he was not a Pan-Scythian deity, being worshipped only by the so-called “Royal” Scythians. Apparently, this was only a tribal deity and the Scythians probably had many of this type, but due to the dominant position of the tribe worshipping him, this tribal cult acquired sufficient weight and hence attracted the attention of the Greek historian.

The name of this Scythian deity is not reliably attested and this complicates the determination of its etymology. We can try to throw light on the nature of the image only through the identification with Poseidon, proposed by Herodotus. The Greek Poseidon is known predominantly as the god of the sea. A number of researchers propose precisely that key for interpreting the Scythian Thagimasadas as well: what is more, he also is identified with Achilles Pontarches, i.e. with Achilles, the ruler over the Pontos, who was worshipped along the Northern Pontic coasts. However, the cult of Achilles





**Fig. 2. A winged horse. Gold appliqué from Kul-Oba**

Pontarches emerged only around the 2nd century and spread mainly among the Pontic Greeks, and not among the indigenous tribes, as attested in the epigraphic sources. Besides, it may be assumed that the sea element did not play a major role in the life and mythology of the nomadic Scythians, hence apparently Herodotus' identification is based on some other aspect of the Greek Poseidon: his connection with horses and his function as patron saint of horse-breeding (Poseidon Hippios, i.e. equine). It is also relevant to recall here that in Athens, to whose citizens Herodotus addressed his work, the image of Poseidon merged with the image of Erichthonius, the mythical progenitor of the Athenians.

In the light of all this it may be assumed that Thagimasadas, who was worshipped by the "Royal" Scythians, was their mythical progenitor, who probably repeated some features of the Pan-Scythian progenitor. However, the fusion between the two images is not complete, due to the social specificities of that Scythian tribe. The actual way of life of the "Royal" Scythians, which was closely connected with horse-breeding, and the notions of the Scythians about water as the element from which

they originated, has attributed a number of features to that image in Scythian mythology, which have given grounds to Herodotus to identify him with the Greek Poseidon, predominantly in his Athenian variant. There are hypotheses that the mythology of that Scythian deity is associated with the popular images of a winged horse on Scythian monuments (*Fig. 2*), based on the Greek iconography of Pegasus – the mythical son of Poseidon and Medusa – as well as the hippocampus: half horse, half sea monster. In principle, this hypothesis is completely true, but bearing in mind that Thagimasadas himself was to a certain extent an autonomous image in the Pan-Scythian religious and mythological system, partly overlapping with other images, one should not rule out the circumstance that the same images received simultaneously another interpretation which was more organic to the system of the Scythian environment.

In order to present the discussed system sufficiently completely, we shall turn now to the myth in which many of the already familiar images are linked together in a more elaborate plot. The analysis of that plot will help us clarify the extent to which the interpretations proposed in this chapter are feasible.



# The Scythian Genealogical Myth

The myth which will be discussed in this chapter is often referred to by researchers as the legend about the origin of the Scythians. In fact, the ancient authors who have preserved this story for us were interested above all in one of its aspects: the genealogy of the kings of Scythia and of its people as a whole. However, the careful analysis reveals that the content of this "legend" is considerably broader, because actually this is not even a myth, but a whole mythological cycle centered around the mythical genealogy of the Scythians. Around that genealogy are grouped in fact all themes from Scythian mythology known to us, all the more that they have come to us in several variants that are independent of one another. Judging by the detailed knowledge of the ancient authors about this mythological cycle, it must have been very popular among the population of the Northern Pontic regions – both among the indigenous population and among the Greek colonists – and it played an important role in the ideology of Scythian society. For the sake of simplicity, further below we shall refer to this cycle as genealogical myth.

It may be assumed that the Greeks became familiar with that myth already during the early days of their penetration along the Northern Pontic coast. Even Alcman, a Greek lyric poet of the second half of the 7th century BC, knew the names of some of the characters in that myth, although the context of their mentioning there did not allow the reconstruction of any stories connected with these figures. There is a hypothesis that Aristeeas of Prokonessos (7th century BC) was the first author to acquaint the Greek audience with that myth, because – according to the legend – he travelled to distant lands in Eurasia and narrated about them in his poem about the Arimaspeans. The earliest version of this myth, which has survived to our days, belonged to



Herodotus, who even wrote it down in two variants.

The first version of Herodotus (IV, 5-6), which according to the historian was widespread among the Scythians, gives the following account of their origin. The first man, called Targitaos, was born in their land, which at that time was still like a desert. According to Scythian notions, his parents were Zeus and the daughter of the Borysthenes river (pres. Dniepr). The three sons of Targitaos – Lipoxais, Arpoxais and Kolaxais – became the progenitors of the three big Scythian families. The brothers had to pass the ordeals sent to them by the gods: gold objects fell from heaven in front of them: a plough with a yoke, an axe and a cup. The sons of Targitaos tried to pick them up, but the gold flared in flames when the first two brothers approached, whereas when the youngest brother, Kolaxais, approached, the flames died down. Taking this to be an omen, the two older brothers recognized the predominance of Kolaxais and he became the progenitor of the Scythian kings.

The second variant of the myth narrated by Herodotus (IV, 8-10) spread – according to him – not among the Scythians, but among the Greeks living along the Pontic coasts. In that story, the Greek hero Herakles, after one of his famous Labours, the stealing of the Oxen of Geryon, came to Scythia, which was uninhabited at that time. The tired hero wrapped himself in the lion's skin and fell asleep. While he slept, his horses disappeared. When Herakles woke up, he started looking for the horses and came to a woody place called Hylaia near the lower course of the Dniepr-Borysthenes. Here he noticed a cave in which a strange creature lived: a woman with a snake-like lower part of the body. She admitted to Herakles that she had the horses and agreed to give them back only if the hero married her. Three sons were born from that marriage. On

leaving Scythia, Herakles left his bow and his warrior's belt to his wife, telling her that she was to put their sons to the following test when they grew up: they had to pull the string of that bow and to put the belt around their waist. Whoever fulfilled the task was to become the king of his mother's land, while the other two brothers had to be exiled. Only the youngest son, Skythes, succeeded and Scythian kings derive his name and genealogy from him. The elder brothers, Agathyrsos and Gelonos, who were banished from the land, became the progenitors and gave their names to the peoples living to the north of Scythia.

How trustworthy was the claim of Herodotus that the myth in question was Greek and not Scythian? Naturally, the fact that its main character was a popular figure in Greek mythology testifies to a certain processing of the myth in a Greek environment; events have even been incorporated in the general texture of his mythical biography. We are yet to discover other traces of this processing in Herodotus' story. However, it is hardly accidental that we came across this hero already when we analysed the Scythian pantheon. Perhaps this is an illustration of the identification between the local and the Greek image with the aim of making the essence of that image more comprehensible to the Greek audience? Such an assumption is all the more plausible bearing in mind that the actual theme of the myth finds exact parallels in the folklore of Iranian-speaking peoples, e.g. in Firdoussi's famous epic *Shahname*, which is known to have accepted many epic and mythological motifs from the ancient Iranians. More specifically, we find there the story about the journey of the hero Rostem, who was looking for the lost horse, about his marriage to Queen Tehmine, who had stolen the horse, and about the birth of their son. Indeed, this narrative is deprived of any fantastic details which can be found in the myth narrated by Herodo-



tus, but the coincidences in the structuring of the story are so great that they suggest that Herodotus' second version was created in a Scythian environment.

Incidentally, there is one thing about which Herodotus was indisputably right: in this processed form, this Scythian myth became very popular among the Greeks as well. This is confirmed, for example, by the text of a Greek inscription of an unknown origin, which tells about the Labours of Herakles (IG XIX, 1293A). The inscription comprises the following episode: the hero comes from Thrace into Scythia, where he defeats Araxes in combat and marries his daughter Echidna. Here the two principal characters have been identified with figures from Greek mythology. Only the local name of the heroine's father – Araxes – has been preserved. This is known to have been the name of one of the rivers in the Eurasian steppe belt during antiquity. Sometimes the ancient Araxes is identified with the present-day Volga, on other occasions – with Amu-Darya. Even at that time it was the name of a river in the Trans-Caucasian region as well, and the name has been preserved to this day. Most probably this was a "vagrant hydronym": precisely due to its important role in Scythian mythology, the name could be used to designate different rivers in the zone inhabited by these people. In the variant of the Scythian myth under consideration, Araxes was beyond any doubt a river (water) deity.

The river Araxes also occurs in the version of the Scythian genealogical myth narrated by Diodorus (II, 43), although there the river does not appear in a mythological context at all. Generally speaking, the composition of the version is rather original. The Greek historian starts his narrative by telling the early history of the Scythians, and this is a perfectly realistic presentation, totally devoid of any mythological element. Many things there coincide with the sto-

ry of Herodotus (IV, 11-12) about the same events; nevertheless, there is no complete identity, which suggests that the two cited authors used different sources. According to Diodorus, the Scythians lived initially along the Araxes river, they were not numerous and were weak in military terms; later they grew stronger, conquered new lands and migrated to the Caucasus and the river Tanaïs (pres. Don). And it is precisely here that the already familiar mythological motif intrudes in the narrative: the earth-born maiden with a snake-like lower part of her body, who appeared at that time among the Scythians, married Zeus and a son called Scythes was born of that marriage, later to become the king of a people that assumed his name. The two brothers Palos and Napes, who became the progenitors of two branches of the Scythian people and gave them their names, stood out with their valour among the progeny of that king. Under the reign of their successors, the Scythians conquered the entire Pontic region and organized the known campaigns to Western Asia. Here we shall analyse the mythological content of the story told by Diodorus, together with the data from other versions of the genealogical myth.

And finally, it is necessary to mention yet another source that has preserved the echo of that myth: *Argonautica* by the 1st century Latin poet Valerius Flaccus. The poem does not contain a consistent story: its entire plot is subordinated to the narrative of the events connected with the voyage of Jason and his companions. However, among these events there is a description of the war between the king of Colchis, Eetion, and his brother Perses, and Flaccus includes among the participants in this war almost all people of the *oecumene* known to the ancient world, or at least to its northern part. The poet mentions each of these peoples or their leaders together with a number of ethnographic or mythological details borrowed from the an-



cient literature. Among the participants in this battle we also discover figures known to us from the versions of the Scythian genealogical myth, cited earlier (IV, 48-68). Thus, his poem also features Colax – indisputably identical to Kolaxais from the first version of Herodotus – the chieftain “with the divine blood”, born from Jupiter and the nymph with the half-animal body living along the Scythian coasts. The name of Auchus, who acted side by side with Kolaxais, recalls the name of the Scythian clan of the Auchatai, who originated from his brother Lipoxais. Moreover, the correlation between the name of the character in *Argonautica* reflects the laws in the Scythian language. As E.A. Grantovskiy has pointed out, many details in Flaccus’ text add to and specify data from other sources and monuments in which the Scythian myth has been preserved; consequently, the poet had access to sources that have not survived to our days. Thus, for example, the description of Auchus contains details that cast a light on the mythological nature of that image, which will be discussed later. The poem of Flaccus reveals other motifs that can be traced back to the Scythian myth, which are very important to us (IV, 638-640).

Ancient literature has preserved to our days several variants of the Scythian genealogical myth, partly repeating and partly complementing one another. In many cases it is possible to assume that the original content of the myth was somewhat distorted when it was reproduced by an author belonging to a different culture. Therefore, in order to reconstruct the myth of interest to us in its complete and reliable form, and in order to clarify its semantics, it is necessary to make a parallel analysis of the versions known to us by comparing all reflections of all of the motifs making this myth up.

We shall start with the figures at the basis of the Scythian genealogical tree.

The first versions in Herodotus and in Diodorus cite Zeus, paralleled by Jupiter in Valerius Flaccus. Naturally, this substitution of the names from Greek or Roman mythology results from the Greek interpretation of the Scythian theme. Here the content of the myth corresponds to the notion about Zeus as the progenitor of the kings of Scythia, which was reflected in the story by Herodotus, referred to earlier, about the answer given by King Idanthyrsos to King Darius. There is no doubt that all these texts actually refer to the same deity, Zeus-Papaïos, whom we met already at the second “level” of the Scythian pantheon.

No such figure is mentioned in the most Hellenized versions of the Scythian myth – the second version of Herodotus and the epigraphic version – because there the genealogy starts with Herakles. However, every Greek knew very well that Herakles was the son of Zeus; consequently, this seems to imply the presence of the principal male deity as the progenitor of the people whose origin is traced in the narrated myth. According to B.N. Grakov’s comment, precisely the similarity in the “genealogy” was among the main reasons for identifying the figure in the Scythian myth with Herakles.

The wife of the god-progenitor has been given different characteristics in the different versions of the Scythian myth. The first version by Herodotus mentions only that she was the daughter of the river Borysthenes, hence she was related to the water element. Diodorus refers to her as the virgin born from the Earth, noting the snake-like lower part of her body. Apparently, this is what Valerius Flaccus had in mind when he mentioned the “half-animal body” of the nymph-progenitress. The snake symbolizes the Earth, the chthonic life-giving element, in the mythological traditions of various peoples and ethnic communities. Probably this aspect of the her-





oine of the myth was reflected in the identification which Valerius Flaccus made between the mother of Colax and Hore – one of the three Greek goddesses of the fertile forces in Nature. Consequently, according to the preserved versions of the Scythian myth, the wife of the supreme deity is either water or Earth. It should be recalled at this stage that we also came to such a dual interpretation of the image of the wife of Zeus-Papaïos, when we analysed the Scythian pantheon described by Herodotus. In this way, all available sources are in full agreement and allow to place the couple Papaïos-Api, i.e. Heaven and Earth (Water), at the foundation of Scythian mythical genealogy.

Excavations of Scythian tumuli have revealed on many occasions female images with completely anthropomorphic upper part of the body, whose lower part is rendered as an elaborate palmette (*Fig. 3*). The end boughs of that palmette often resemble snakes or dragon-like creatures, the middle part being of a more floral nature. Scholars are remarkably unanimous in their interpretation of these images as representing the same “snake-legged goddess” – the progenitress of the Scythians – about whom the analysed myth narrates. The combination of snake-like and floral ornamentation in the palmette reflects simultaneously the link of that figure with the





*Fig. 3. The "snake-legged goddess".  
Gold appliqué from Kul-Oba*

*Fig. 4. The "snake-legged goddess".  
A horse's head-piece from  
Bolshalya Tsymbalka*

*Fig. 5. Herakles. Gold appliqué from  
a horse bridle. Chmyreva  
barrow*

chthonic principle, representing the Earth's life-giving forces. The image found in the Kul-Oba tumulus (*Fig. 4*) is of particular interest: in addition to the snake-like palmette described, here there are two snakes that seem to grow out of the shoulders of the goddess. This detail is directly relevant to the description given by Valerius Flaccus, who mentions not only the nymph's "half-animal body", but some "two snakes" as well. Images with snakes growing out of their shoulders are well known in the Iranian mythical and epic tradition. Such is, for example, the villain Zohak in *Shahname* – a late hypostasis of the mythological chthonic monster Aždahak.

The iconographic basis of all images of the Scythian "snake-legged goddess" was the image of some chthonic creature that took shape in Greek art. However, along the Northern Pontic coasts that image was adapted to personify an exclusively indigenous mythical character, and it was as such that it became extremely popular in Scythia.

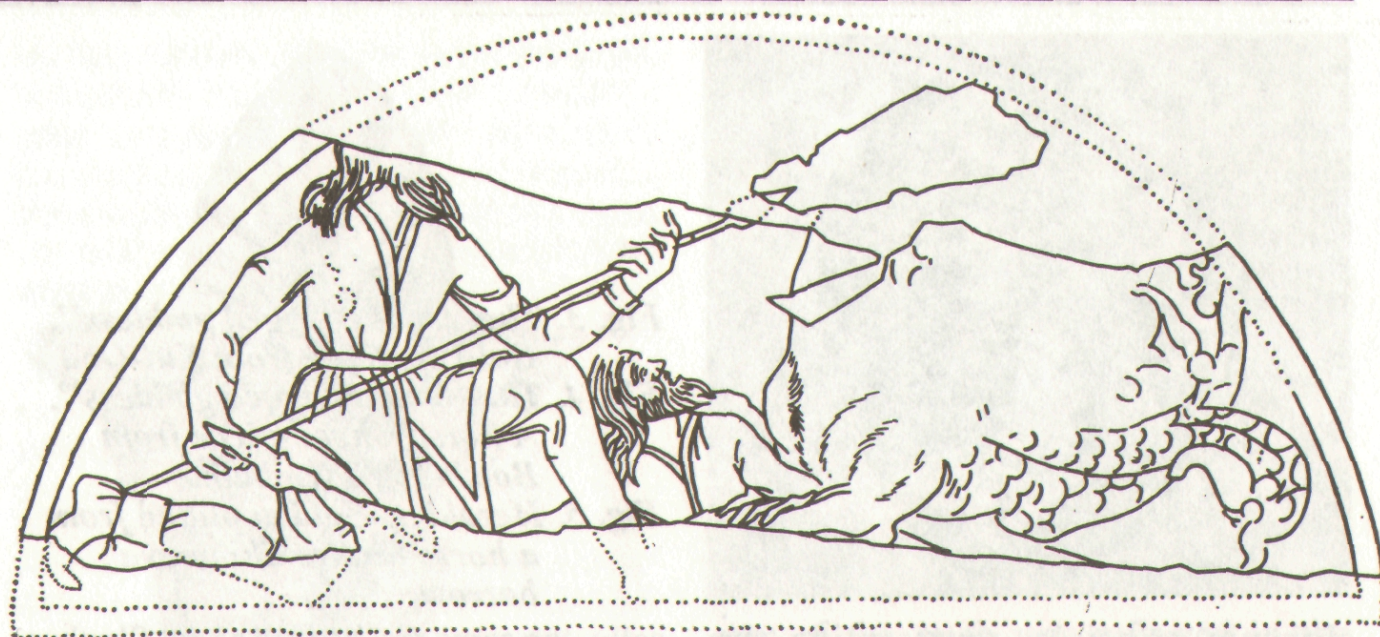
This marriage between Heaven and Earth gave birth to a character that was essentially the principal figure in the Scythian genealogical myth. In Herodotus' first version he was called Targitaos. The information about him contained in that source is reduced to his being the first man, the progenitor of the Scythians and of their kings. Basi-

cally, the same can be said about Skythes in the version of the myth given by Diodorus: although this person seemed to appear "in the middle" of Scythian history, and not at all in its beginning, he was the direct descendant of the gods and had no genealogical links with the earlier generations; these generations seem to have been ignored with such a composition of the myth, they prove to be unconnected with the contemporary Scythia, with its people and kings.

V.I. Abaev has proposed an Iranian etymology of the name of that character in Herodotus' first version: Targitaos – *darga-tawa* "with long power". Such a name suits perfectly the mythological hero, who has been credited – as we shall see below – with numerous heroic deeds; however, it sheds no additional light on the mythological essence of his image. In Diodorus the identical hero is the eponym of the people originating from him. Such a name could have been given to him even in the Scythian tradition proper, but it could also have been substituted by the Greek authors: the real name of the hero meant nothing to the Greek audience and they substituted it with the name of the people stemming from him.

In the Hellenized versions of the myth – the second version of Herodotus and the epigraphic one – this is the figure to which Herakles corresponds (*Fig. 5*).





**Fig. 6. The fight of a Scythian against a chthonic monster. Plaque from a comb. Bone. Gaymanova barrow**

**Fig. 7. Female chthonic deity. Plaque from a comb. Bone. Gaymanova barrow**

Similar to Targitaos-Skythes, he was the progenitor of the people and of the kings whose descendants started the different "clans" of the Scythians. It is particularly important for us that this hero, as we saw in the previous chapter, was the Greek equivalent of one of the deities at the third "level" of the Scythian pantheon. If Herakles, the deity in the pantheon, is identical to Herakles, the hero in the genealogical myth, which seems to be the most plausible hypothesis, we receive additional confirmation that the proposed interpretation of the structure of the Scythian pantheon is logical. In mythological cosmogony, as it has taken shape in the Scythian myth, the birth of the first man from the marriage of Heaven and Earth was essentially identical to the act resulting in the creation of the "middle world", i.e. the zone inhabited by people. The first man himself is the incarnation of the world emerging between Heaven and Earth, he is the third element in the divine triad modelling the tripartite Cosmos. This is why, Herakles-Targitaos proved to be included in the Scythian pantheon, side by side with Zeus-Papaïos (Heaven) and Gaia-Api (the Earth). Earlier we examined the arguments in favour of interpreting the Scythian deities from the third "level" as belonging to the middle cosmic zone. Such an interpretation fully corresponds to the proposed





interpretation of the fourth deity at that "level", i.e. Herakles.

Targitaos-Herakles was the first figure in the Scythian genealogical myth with whom certain collisions are associated in the preserved sources. For example, the epigraphic version narrates about his victory over Araxes. Judging by the latter's name, which coincides – as we have seen – with the Scythian hydronym, this was reference to the combat against the incarnation of the chthonic elements. Similar heroic deeds are a typical element in the biography of the mythical progenitor. In the different traditions he is simultaneously a hero slaying monsters that incarnate the initial chaos, and he takes part in the ordering of the Cosmos.

A hint at such heroic deeds is also contained in Herodotus' second version of the Scythian myth, which starts with the information that Herakles arrived in Scythia after his fight against Geryon, the three-headed monster associated – similar to Araxes – with the chthonic world. After the victory, the hero drove away his herds. Why was this motif included in the narrative about the progenitor of the Scythians? According to the Greek tradition, Geryon lived far in the West, on an island in the Ocean, behind the pillars of Herakles, which Herodotus has also referred to in his

narrative. Hence the road from his country to Hellas did not pass at all through the Northern Pontic coasts, hence the inclusion of the motif in question in the Scythian myth was not by far the most natural way of incorporating this myth in the general texture of the narrative about the Labours of Herakles. He was most probably invoked from Greek mythology because of the content of the actual Scythian myth, in which a similar episode could have existed. Such an assumption seems even more plausible bearing in mind that the motif in which the hero or the deity is driving away the bulls (cows) belonging to some monster, is contained in the Old-Indic mythology, and the 4th century AD Latin author Firmicus Maternus reports that different Iranian-speaking peoples worshipped some deity who "stole bulls". In other words, this story had existed even earlier in Indo-Iranian tradition.

Some years ago, archaeologists found two bone plaques which used to adorn the handle of a comb during excavations of the Gaymanova mound. The scene depicted on one of them (*Fig. 6*) is directly related to the theme under consideration. It features the fight of two Scythians against a monster, whose figure has unfortunately not been preserved entirely. The monster has leonine front paws, a body covered with scales and a



split tail (resembling the tail of a fish or a dragon). Judging by its outer experience, it is connected with the water element, with the "lower world". One of the depicted Scythians dies in the monster's paws, while the second one kills the dragon with a spear. We have every reason to compare this monument with the Scythian myth about the victory of Herakles-Targitaos over Araxes, Geryon or some other chthonic creature.

The image on the second bone plaque of the same comb is also interesting (*Fig. 7*). Here we see a fantastic creature with a woman's head and with wings, the lower part of her body being shaped like a floral palmette. On the whole, the rendering of the image is very close to the images of the "snake-legged goddess" Api, considered earlier. Such a combination of decorative motifs on the same object is not at all accidental, bearing in mind the evidence in the Scythian myth about the wife of Targitaos-Herakles.

Actually, to be accurate, we know nothing about the wife of Targitaos – the hero of Herodotus' first version. Nothing is said in the text about her, incidentally also about the wife of Skythes in the version given by Diodorus. On the other hand, in the two Hellenized versions of the myth discussed, there is some very curious information about the wife of Herakles, i.e. the figure identified with Targitaos. In the epigraphic version she is the daughter of Araxes whom Herakles defeated, i.e. she is genetically related to the water element. Here she is called Echidna and this substitution of the figure from the Greek mythology replaces the description of the heroine's image, because Echidna was known as half-woman and half-snake, who lives in a cave. This is actually the description given to the wife of Herakles in Herodotus' second version of the Scythian myth. The snake-like lower part of her body suggests her links with the Earth, as well as being an indi-

cation that the nymph lived in a cave, i.e. in the Earth's womb. It is also interesting that even Firmicus Maternus referred to a female deity with snakes, in addition to the male deity stealing bulls. Summing up the available information about that heroine of the Scythian myth, we may conclude that she was a semi-ophiomorphic chthonic creature that originated either from the Earth, or from the water. But such are precisely, as we have seen, the image and the nature of the female figure from the previous stage in the Scythian mythical genealogy, i.e. the wife of Papaïos.

Such a complete coincidence gives us grounds to claim that the same heroine appears in all versions of the myth, although her position in the thematic texture of the myth may differ: the "snake-legged goddess" appears in the role of the wife either of the supreme deity of the Scythians, or of his son. This discrepancy may be assumed to result from the distortion of the Scythian myth, when it was rendered in the context of a different cultural tradition, all the more that in none of the surviving versions there are female characters belonging to two generations. However, another explanation seems more probable. In mythology (and in particular in the Indo-Iranian tradition) a very frequent motif is that of the incest performed initially as a mandatory step in the formation of the world and in the origin of the people. For instance, according to the Zoroastrian notions, which indisputably formed on the basis of the ancient mythology of the tribes speaking the Iranian language, the supreme deity Ahuramazda coupled with the Earth's goddess Spendarmat (Spenta Armaiti) to create the first man, Gaio-mard, who subsequently became the husband of his own mother and with their progeny started the human kind. In fact, this myth is identical to the myth which may be reconstructed about the Scythians on the basis of all its surviving



versions. These sources do not point specifically that the wife of the first man in Scythian mythology was his own mother, above all probably due to the fact that the story about her has survived to our days only in the Greek versions, where the Greek Herakles has replaced the original Scythian figure. In the context of his biography, the events in Scythia are only one episode and therefore the narrative starts with the information that he had come to that land from outside, but not that he was the son of a local goddess.

In connection with the proposed reconstruction of the original theme of the Scythian myth, it is interesting to note the claim of the 1st century philosopher Philon of Alexandria that the tribes of the Scythians "lived according to peculiar laws and rules, and that they allowed a shameful incest with their mothers, and that the Scythians handed this practice down to their children and to their progeny, so that this custom gradually acquired the force of law in the course of time." The total absence of any evidence of that kind in the works of the other ancient authors (including in such detailed descriptions of Scythian way of life, which can be found in Herodotus) suggests that we should be rather sceptical to Philon's opinion that such marriages were the generally accepted norm in Scythia. M.F. Boltenko and I. Marazov launched a plausible hypothesis: this is a Scythian mythological motif, which was treated as real practice. It is not accidental that Philon's words were a hint that such marriages in Scythia were usually justified by referring to some ancient precedent, and such precedents could only be found in events dating back to the mythical times from the beginning of the world. It is in the myth that incest usually appears as an event from the life of the progenitors, i.e. it was referred back to an age that preceded the establishing of the accepted norms of social behavior, most prom-

inent among these forms being the exogamous character of the marriages. It is apparent that Philon's moralizing passage refers to precisely such a mythological motif, which confirms its reconstruction on the basis of the versions of the Scythian myth.

Let us turn now to the next generation in the Scythian mythical genealogy: the sons of the first man. In Herodotus' first and second versions, as well as in the epigraphic version, that was the generation marking the division of the genealogical tree into several branches. In the version proposed by Diodorus, the brothers Palos and Napes were simply referred to as "progeny" of Scythes and it is not clear whether he was their father or a more remote ancestor. However, at any rate the myth mentions nothing about the generations that could be found in the genealogy between them, and the meaning of the narrative again focuses on the claim that the different groups of Scythians originated from the progeny of Scythes. In *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus there is no reference whatsoever to any kinship between the figures borrowed for his story from the Scythian myth, and only by comparing them to the characters bearing the same names in the first version of Herodotus, it was possible to assume an analogy in the structure of the narrative in the source which the Roman poet used.

If the parts of the Scythian genealogical myth examined above coincided along general lines in the different versions, in the story about the progeny of the first man we are already faced with controversies between the versions. Above all, even the number of his sons varies: three sons in the two versions of Herodotus, and two sons in the epigraphic version and in that of Diodorus. There is also a big difference in the trials which the brothers in Herodotus' two versions had to go through. There are likewise differences in the character of the narrative about the two brothers-progenitors



and about the subdivisions of the Northern Pontic population that stemmed from them. For example, in the first version of Herodotus there is a discrepancy between the name of the brothers and of the "clans" stemming from them, while in the other sources the respective figures are eponyms for the tribal communities stemming from them. Even the nature of these communities was different: if in Herodotus' first version and in Diodorus' version they are all referred to the Scythians, in the two Hellenized versions – Herodotus' second version and the epigraphic one – the sons of Herakles were progenitors and eponyms of unrelated ethnic communities: in Herodotus – of the Scythians, Agathyrsoi and Gelonoi, in the epigraphic text – of the Scythians and of the Agathyrsoi. All these differences have prompted us to consider the concluding passages of the Scythian genealogical myth separately according to the different versions, and only then to compare the results obtained and to define the nature of the discrepancies noted.

This part of the myth is presented in greatest detail in Herodotus' first version, where one should analyse in the first place the names of the three sons of Targitaos: Lipoxais, Arpoxais and Kolaxais. Linguists have found a long time ago that the common root in the second part of the three names stems from the Iranian word *xšaia*, meaning "ruler, dynast, king". However, researchers are not so unanimous on the meaning of the first elements of each of these names. The most widely accepted interpretation seems to be that of the name Arpoxais: according to V.I. Abaev, it contains the same root which, in combination with the element *dan* (Iranian *danu* "river"), formed the ancient name of the Dniepr river – Danapris – that can be traced beyond any doubt to the Iranian language; it has also been preserved in the Ossetic *arf* "deep". All these words are derived from the same Iranian *ar* (wa-

ter), which was mentioned earlier already in connection with the interpretation of the name of the goddess Api. The whole name of Arpoxais can be translated as "ruler of the (water) depths" or "King of the depths".

This interpretation allows to give meaning to the two other sons of Targitaos as well. V.I. Abaev interpreted the name of Kolaxais as a rendering of the Iranian *xvar-xšaia*, i.e. "King-Sun" (the alternation of *r* and *l* being quite common in the dialects of the Scythian language, which has been confirmed by many examples). As regards the name Lipoxais, E.A. Grantovskiy compares it with the name *Rhipi*, Rhipaci Montes. According to the surviving evidence from the ancient tradition, that was the name of the mountain range localized in the northern end of the lands beyond Scythia. The use of the same root, again with a meaning connected with mountains, has been found in the *Rigveda* as well. All this allows to interpret the name of the third brother – Lipoxais – as "King-Mountain" (again with the cited alternation of the sounds).

If the proposed etymology of each of the three names could give rise to any doubts individually, their interpretation together – as shown by E.A. Grantovskiy – is very consistent and systematic, which is a solid argument in support of such an interpretation. The narrative about the sons of Targitaos seems to end the story about the formation of the Cosmos: the three brothers personify the same three levels of the cosmic structure, which – in their combination – make up the Scythian cosmological model: the terrestrial (water) depths, the Sun (the upper, celestial world) and finally the mountain, i.e. the middle element linking the other two. This triad seems to repeat at a lower level the system personified by the three deities in the Pantheon: Api, Papaïos and Targitaos. Targitaos is the incarnation of the entire material world that can be found be-



tween Heaven and Earth, while his three sons are the personifications of the elements that make up that world.

The problem of the real nature of the division of Scythian society, stemming from these brothers, has occupied the minds of researchers for a long time. Most detailed data in this connection are found again in Herodotus' first version. In that narrative, each of the sons of Targitaos became the progenitor of one Scythian clan: the Katiaroi and the Traspies stemmed from Arpoxais, the Auchatai – from Lipoxais, and the Paralatae – from Kolaxais. As we have seen, the other versions of the Scythian myth tell about the origin of the different peoples, i.e. about the ethnogenesis of the Pontic population. Since the word which we translated earlier as "clan" (*genos* in Greek) allows different interpretations – ethnic interpretations included – for a long time the prevalent opinion was that Herodotus' first story was about the initial division of the Scythian population into different tribes. The contest between the brothers for the right to acquire the gold objects that fell from the sky ended with the victory of the youngest brother, about which there is detailed information in the myth, which was interpreted to explain the dominance of one Scythian tribe over the rest. From other parts of the story of Herodotus it becomes clear that such was the position of the tribe of the so-called "Royal Scythians" and that they were identified with the Paralatae, the successors of Kolaxais. The Auchatai, Katiaroi and Traspies were perceived as the other tribes mentioned by Herodotus: the ploughing Scythians, the farmers-Scythians and the nomadic Scythians.

And yet, many elements of the Scythian myth fail to form a part of such an interpretation. Above all, Herodotus mentions six Scythian tribes, while the "clans" stemming from the sons of Targitaos are four at the most; besides,

if one takes into account the peculiarities of the Greek text, the phrase "Katiaroi and Traspies" should be interpreted with a higher degree of probability as a compound bipartite name of a clan or tribe, which leaves only three clans (which actually coincides with the number of the brothers-progenitors). Even that very fact suggests that the myth under consideration is not about the interrelations of the Scythian tribes, but about a structure of some other nature. This assumption has found a number of very interesting and expressive confirmations in the works of many researchers, and especially of G. Dumézil and E. A. Grantovskiy.

A very important example can be found in the fact that among the names of the Scythian clans stemming from the sons of Targitaos there is one that is very well known from the surviving monuments of another Iranian tradition, i.e. the name of the Paralatae stemming from Kolaxais. This name is the Greek transcription of the Iranian term *paradata* (with the pronunciation typical of the Scythian dialects), which was a title of the mythical first king of the ancient Iranians, Hušeng, about whom there are many mythical and epic texts, the *Shah-name* included. According to that tradition, Hušeng was the founder of the first Iranian dynasty and the progenitor of the caste of the warriors, of the military aristocracy, to which the kings also belonged. The word *paradata* means "placed in front, in the lead". Its exact Greek translation – *proestheotes* – occurs in Herodotus' *Scythian Logos* as well (IV, 49): that was the name of the Scythian chieftains in the narrative about the fate of the Scythian king Skyles. All this suggests that the name of the clan stemming from Kolaxais should be perceived as a social term that is analogous in meaning to a definition of the social status of Hušeng.

This assumption also finds confirmation in the passage about the Parala-



tae in Herodotus' version of the myth. In his narrative about the descendents of Kolaxais, the historian states directly that the kings – those who were called Paralatae – stemmed from Kolaxais. In the years when the monotribal interpretation of the Scythian myth about the sons of Targitaos and about the clans stemming from them predominated, researchers tended to think that such an interpretation ran counter to the general meaning of the story. Hence they considered that this was a distortion attributed to the scribes and the different transcripts of the text, and therefore a correction was introduced in Herodotus' text, according to which the passage of interest to us was to be read in the following way: those who are called Paralatae stemmed from the younger brother. However, it became increasingly clearer in the course of time that such a correction was totally unnecessary and that the text correlated perfectly with the general content of the myth and with the data in the Iranian tradition on the meaning of the term used as an appellation of the Scythian *genos*.

In the cited Iranian tradition, the warriors stemming from Hušeng constituted one of the elements of the tripartite class-caste system, traces of which have been found by researchers among most Indo-European peoples. This classification is particularly clearly perceived among the Indo-Iranians. The best known example in this respect is considered to be the three Varnas of ancient India: the Kṣatriya (the warriors, the military aristocracy, including the kings), the Brahmins (the priests) and the Vaiśya (the ordinary community members, the direct producers of material wealth). A similar tripartite social structure among the Indo-European peoples was associated with a rather intricate system of ideological notions. Recently this was very well illustrated in the works of many researchers, most prominent among them being those of

G.Dumézil. This structure was relevant to the progenitor-brothers. For example, in the Iranian tradition, in addition to Hušeng Paradat – the ancestor of the caste of warriors – there was also his brother, Vegerd, the ancestor of farmers. The same structure was correlated with the cosmological model, it found expression in the colour symbolism, in the attributes usually associated with each of the class-caste groups, etc., hence it could be reflected through most varied "cultural codes". Let us see now the main figures in the Scythian myth and in the clans stemming from them in the light of all this evidence.

So far the meaning of the term "Paralatae" and the context in which it has been used in Herodotus's story constitute the only argument in support of the social interpretation of the myth about the sons of Targitaos. But according to the description of Kolaxais in *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus, he himself and his warriors decorated their shields with "fires divided into three parts", with flashing lightning and with pictures of red wings. Next to this we find the description of Auchus, who was identical to Lipoxais, the progenitor of the Auchatai; his distinctive features were his white hair since his birth and a special band that passed three times over his temples, with ends hanging downwards. Further below we shall come back again to the "triple fire" of Kolaxais. Let us consider briefly the sharp contrast of the colours associated with the different figures: red for Kolaxais and white for Auchus, which was noted by E.A.Grantovskiy. Incidentally, in the Indo-Iranian tradition which can be traced back to most ancient times, the red colour was treated as a distinctive and specific feature of warriors, while white was a symbol of priesthood. The peculiar band worn by Auchus was also a distinctive feature of a priest, and it appears in many works of art of the ancient Iranians. In this way, we have some orienta-



tion about the social nature of the second Scythian clan: apparently the descendents of Lipoxais should be perceived as representatives of the Scythian priesthood. Then – according to the Indo-Iranian pattern – the last clan of the Katiaroi and the Traspies had to perform the third function, i.e. they had to be the ordinary members of the community.

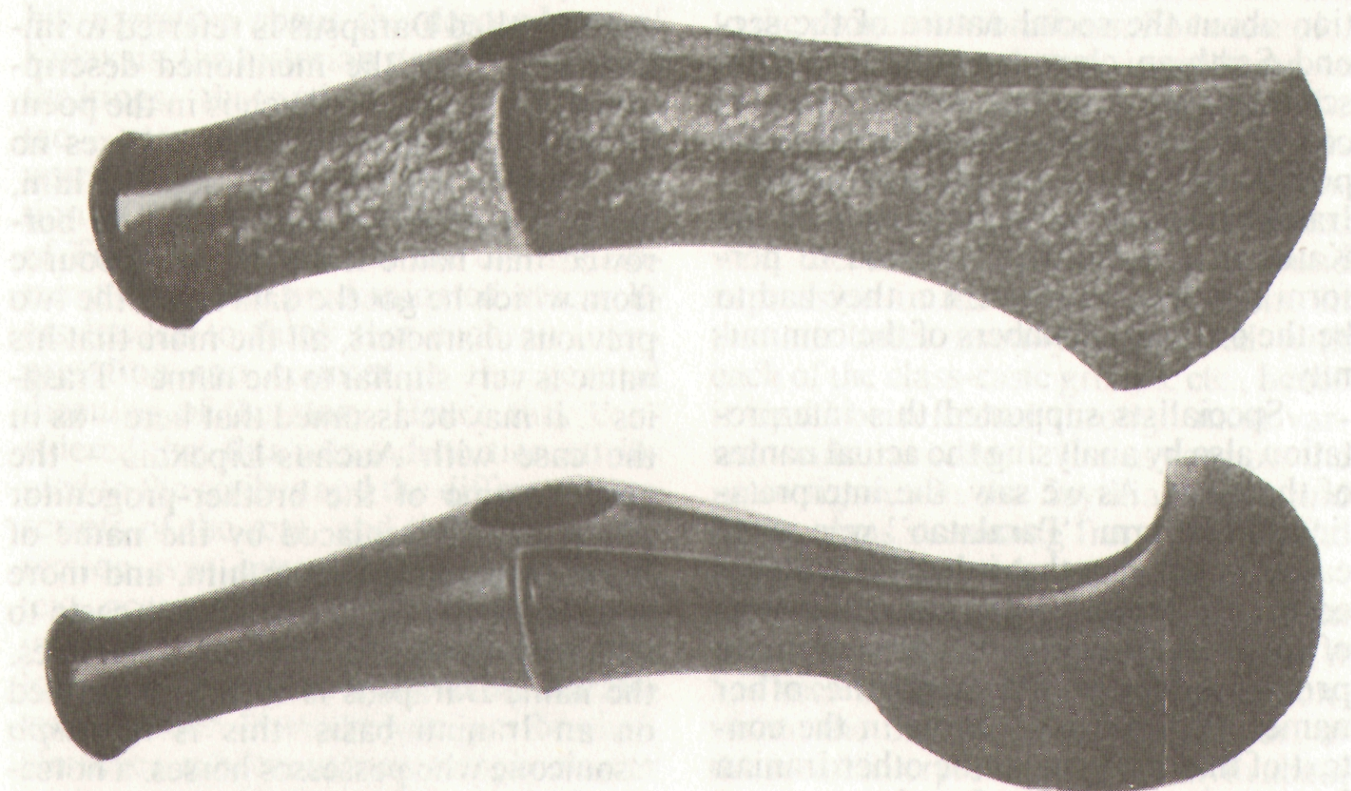
Specialists supported this interpretation also by analysing the actual names of the clans. As we saw, the interpretation of the term “Paralatae” was made easier by the fact that it had been attested even outside Scythia, in other parts of the Iranian world. There were more problems connected with the other names: they are not known in the context of interest to us in the other Iranian languages, added to the circumstance that we knew them only in a Greek variant, which was not always very accurate, and all this further complicated the studies on their etymology. However, V.A.Abaev saw the Iranian *vahu-ta* (“good, kind”) in the term Auchtai, which, as Grantovskiy suggested, was a very relevant name for the caste of priests, all the more that there exist examples of words having this root being used by peoples who had experienced the strong influence of the Iranian environment, e.g. the Armenians. Indeed, G.Dumézil proposed a different interpretation of that term and saw the Auchatai as the clan of the warriors, but the interpretation proposed by Grantovskiy is more convincing, precisely owing to its complex character.

So far there is still no universally accepted interpretation of the name of the last Scythian clan, i.e. that of the Katiaroi and the Traspies. G.Dumézil compared the term “Traspies” with the name of the Iranian deity Drvaspa, who protected horses and horse-breeding. The presence of the Iranian root *aspa* “horse” in this term is beyond any doubt. In this connection we shall note that a

person called Darapsus is referred to immediately after the mentioned description of Kolaxais and Auchus in the poem by Valerius Flaccus. The poet gives no information that could characterize him, but it is perfectly probable that he borrowed that name from the same source from which he got the data about the two previous characters, all the more that his name is very similar to the name “Traspies”. It may be assumed that here – as in the case with Auchus-Lipoxais – the proper name of the brother-progenitor Arpoxais was replaced by the name of the clan stemming from him, and more specifically by the name of that caste to which his descendents belonged. Besides, the name Darapsus is easily interpreted on an Iranian basis: this is *dar-aspa* “someone who possesses horses, a horse-breeder”. In this connection it is interesting to note that in one of the narratives devoted to the Scythians, the Greek author Polyainos (VII, 44) opposed the Scythian warriors to the main mass of the people, referring to the latter as “farmers and horse-breeders”. This is again such a bipartite term as “Katiaroi and Traspies”, whereby the second element corresponds fully to the proposed interpretation of the Scythian “Traspies”. A similar bipartite term has been used to designate the lower social category in the Avestan tradition as well. It is fully possible that Polyainos used the exact Greek equivalent for the Scythian social term. Unfortunately, for the time being we are unable to support such an interpretation by deciphering the first element – Katiaroi – making up this term.

It was mentioned already that in the Indo-Iranian world the tripartite system of classes and castes was compared to the cosmological model as well. The same is also valid of the Scythian myth, where – as we saw – the brothers-progenitors personified the three cosmic zones, whereby the cosmic and the social semantics correlated very well with one another: the Katiaroi and the Traspies,





whose activities were connected with the fertile forces of Nature, stemmed from the brother who personified the lower, chthonic world; the warriors-Paralatae with the fiery red symbolism characteristic of them were the descendants of Kolaxais, the Sun; the priests-Auchatai, one of whose functions was the mediation between the world of ordinary people and the world of the gods, stemmed from Lipoxais, i.e. the mountains linking the sky and the earth.

The proposed interpretation of the myth about the three sons of Targitaos, based on the analysis of fragmentary information obtained from different authors, can find a very systematic confirmation, if we turn to the motif which we have not yet considered: the story about the sacred objects made of gold. A. Christensen, G. Dumézil, E. Benveniste and E. A. Grantovskiy have devoted special attention to their interpretation. As we can recall, in Herodotus's story the objects that fell from the sky at the time of the brothers-progenitors were: a plough with a yoke, an axe and a cup. These attributes fully correspond to the described social stratification. The

plough with the yoke constituted indisputably the attributes of farmers and horse-breeders, moreover its composite bipartite character is directly correlated to its dual function in the cited social category and to its name: the plough is used by farmers tilling the fields, while the yoke is associated with cattle-breeding as well. During the Scythian period, the population along the Northern Pontic coasts generally changed to a nomadic way of life, but that object, which had been inherited from the Bronze Age when the Iranians were characterized by their complex agricultural and stock-breeding activities, remained a symbolic attribute of the lower caste. This detail testifies to the time when the mythology of the Proto-Scythians was formed.

The battle-axe was one of the most characteristic elements in the armament of the Pontic tribes during the same Bronze Age, when that role was played predominantly by stone axes. For example, such axes are very characteristic of the bearers of the so-called catacomb culture, dated to the end of the 3rd and the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Let us recall in this connection the re-





markable stone axes from the so-called Bessarabian treasure (*Fig. 8*): the group of objects found along the northwestern Pontic coasts undoubtedly belonged to some tribal leader from the 2nd millennium BC and he used them not so much as weapons in battle, but rather as a status symbol. Iron battle-axes were used in the Pontic region during Early Scythian times. We know about richly decorated axes, which is an indication of the ritual function of the object in question. A typical example in this respect, for instance, is the gilded, richly decorated iron axe (*Fig. 9*) found in the Kelermes mound, which was excavated along the Kuban river. It cannot be ruled out that the actual practice of placing this gold axe in the grave of the chieftain was prompted by the same tradition which had been reflected in the analysed myth. It is curious to note that the blunt side of the axe is decorated with the image of a youth holding the same battle-axe in his hand (*Fig. 10*). Could it be that this was Kolaxais – the mythical first owner of the sacred relic? Consequently, the gold axe was the symbol and the attribute of the caste of warriors.

*Fig. 8. Stone axes. Bessarabian treasure. 2nd millennium BC*

*Fig. 9. Gilded iron axe. Kelermes barrow*

*Fig. 10. Warrior holding an axe. Decoration on an axe from Kelermes*



And finally, the cup made of gold was a typical attribute of priests, invariably present in the rite of sacrificial libations. Ritual vessels of different shapes have been found in Scythian mounds (*Fig. 11*): rhytons, shallow phialae, spheric cups and vessels having a broad neck and two horizontal handles. In most cases these cups were made of some precious metal, or were at least coated with a film of precious metal and were decorated with mythological scenes, which will be discussed later. It cannot be stated with certainty precisely which form was perceived in Scythia as the incarnation of the sacred cup that fell from the sky; incidentally, Herodotus used the term "phiale" to designate this cup.

Consequently, the three attributes figuring in the Scythian myth corresponded exactly to the tripartite stratification of society, which can be traced in the other elements of that myth as well. Another no less important feature of these attributes is their fiery nature, which is attested beyond any doubt by the circumstance that they could catch fire when someone approached them. This gives grounds for the statement that the three objects which fell from the sky were the three fires of the three caste groups. Such a symbolism was familiar to the Iranian world. For example, during the early mediaeval Sassanid state the three sacred fires of Zoroastrianism were worshipped, each of them being perceived as sacred to one of the social categories dating from the most ancient mythical times and being analogous to the Scythian ones. This triunity of the sacred fires reflects the above-mentioned notion about fire as a primeval and all-encompassing element that permeates the entire world and is present in each of its zones. As we have seen, in Scythian mythology this element is personified in the image of the goddess Hestia-Tabiti. In that case, could it be that the myth contained the answer to the still outstanding question formulated earlier

about the nature of a certain multiplicity of the "royal Hestiae" of the Scythians? Could this name conceal the attributes just analysed? They are Hestiae in the same sense in which Tabiti is Hestia, a fire-deity; they are also of a celestial, i.e. divine, origin and of a fiery nature. And they are royal, too, because according to the Scythian myth, they all became the possession of the youngest brother Kolaxais, the progenitor of the warriors and kings, and since these mythical times they were jealously guarded by the Scythian kings. The circumstance that the two older brothers could not have the gold which caught fire when they approached, and that the gold was accessible only to the youngest brother, suggests the dominant position of Kolaxais and of the caste in Scythian society which he represented (let us recall that in Valerius Flaccus the shield of Kolaxais is decorated with the picture of fire divided into three parts, i.e. that person possessed the three sacred fires). The possession of these objects was the sign sent by heaven to Kolaxais and to his descendents, the Scythian kings, about the divine origin of their power and about the fact that they were brought closer to the goddess Tabiti. This is why, the oath "in the name of the royal Hestiae" was – in the words of Herodotus – the highest oath of the Scythians, while a false oath invoking these sacred names brought a grave illness to the king: this was a violation of the status sanctioned by the gods and it had to be invariably expiated by the death penalty being imposed on the sacrilegious individual.

Herodotus ends his narrative about the Scythian myth with information about the next generation in the mythical genealogy: the three sons of Kolaxais between whom the entire Scythian kingdom was divided. Since these mythical times, Scythia was ruled by three kings, one of whom – the supreme dynast – guarded the sacred objects of gold. The same ternary structure that characterizes





**Fig. 11. Scythian ritual vessel.**  
*Chmyreva barrow*

the Scythian cosmological model and social structure is projected here onto the political organization of the Scythians. According to the evidence in Herodotus, a similar organization was characteristic of Scythia at least until the end of the 6th century BC: during the war against Darius the army of the Scythians was led by three kings, the oldest among whom – Idanthyrsos – uttered the words cited earlier that he recognized only his ancestor Zeus and Hestia, the Queen of the Scythians, as his sovereigns. Here we see the direct reflection of the notion about the continuity of power that can be traced back to Kolaxais, the first Scythian king having “divine blood”. In the eyes of the Scythians, the remote ancient character of the social and political institutions, dating back to the mythical times of the ancestors, was perceived as a guarantee for the “correctness” of these institutions and hence as a guarantee for the stability and welfare of Scythian society.

Nevertheless, having analysed the entire Scythian myth which explains the structure and the nature of the social

cosmos of the Scythians, we have failed to obtain an explanation of one of the elements of the formula pronounced by Idanthyrsos, and consequently of the notions about the structure of the world, reflected in it: why was Hestia referred to as “Queen of the Scythians”? The actual content of the myth does not give an answer to this question. However, immediately after Herodotus narrated the myth, he described the forms of worship of the sacred objects, practised by the Scythians, i.e. the worshipping of the “royal Hestiac”, according to the proposed explanation. Could it be that this description would add something to our notions about the content of the Scythian myth? Such an assumption is logical, all the more bearing in mind that the forms of this worship, which follow from Herodotus’ story, originated in the same mythical times and could perfectly be associated with the events in the myth.

Herodotus reported the following: “The kings of the Scythians guarded the above-mentioned gold very jealously and worshipped it with rich sacrifices every year. Whoever fell asleep under



the open sky with that sacred gold during a festive occasion, he – in the words of the Scythians – would not even live one year more; therefore he was given as much land as he could tour on horseback in one day.” Let us consider this passage, drawing attention both to its general composition and to every minor detail.

Researchers are unanimous that this meant events from the annual Scythian festivities which were virtually the central event in the Scythian religious calendar. These were the festivities during which rich sacrifices were offered to the sacred gold attributes. Most probably this coincided with the same moment in the calendar when – according to the myth – the gold relics fell from the sky onto Scythian soil. But who was the person who fell asleep with the sacred gold during the festivities? A hypothesis was launched (B.N. Grakov) that this was one of the guards who had the obligation of watching over the sacred objects for a very long time: the person who was the first to fail in this vigil and to fall asleep, was doomed to death. However, only one line higher Herodotus informs that the gold was guarded by the Scythian kings themselves. Moreover, in his narrative about the death of the man who fell asleep, he added a curious detail: this death did not in the least follow immediately after the offence, it was separated from it by a relatively long period of time, which incidentally did not exceed one year. Insofar as the sleep occurred at a definite moment of the calendar, it may be assumed that the ensuing death of that individual also had a definite calendar fixation. And finally, it is particularly noteworthy that this death was not in the least a punishment for the offence; it was the inevitable consequence of the sleep, but it required a definite (and moreover substantial) compensation. The way in which the size of this compensation was determined was also curious: the doomed individual was

given as much land as he could tour on horseback in one day.

What if we assumed that all these elements of the festivities reproduced events in which the principal figures of the myth took part? Such an assumption is a satisfactory explanation of all specificities of the elements of the Scythian religious acts listed so far. According to the myth, Kolaxais – the personification of the Sun – was the first owner of the sacred gold. The notion about the annual solar cycle presupposes that the Sun died every year, that it was reborn again every year and that it reached the culmination of its power on the day of the summer solstice. On receiving the gold attributes, Kolaxais was brought closer to the sacred fire, which guaranteed him the greatest power. However, his solar nature required that Kolaxais-Sun would die before the year was over. Could this not be an explanation of the time interval between the day of the festivities and the moment of that person's death? The repetition of the festivities every year correlates well with the idea about the regular renovation of the royal power, which was customary in the ideology of the ancient societies and was a mandatory condition for the welfare of the community led by the king. Hence the Scythian king – a descendent of Kolaxais who also inherited his mythical fate – was brought again and again closer to the sacred gold every year, but then the person had to die. Researchers (G. Dumézil, M. A. Artamonov) launched the hypothesis a long time ago that the person performing the rituals during the Scythian festivities was the so-called temporary king, i.e. an individual called upon to substitute the real king in the bloody rituals imitating the annual death of the King-Sun. The land given to him for one year was most probably not real property, as suggested, e.g., by M. I. Artamonov, being instead an imitation of the “kingdom” of such a temporary king; besides, the way in which its size was determined, was prompted by





*Fig. 12. Gold appliqué from Kul-Oba*

the king's solar nature, reproducing the diurnal movement of the Sun, the "round" of his solar possessions. A similar ceremony of the royal rounds was widely practised in the antiquity and its origin can be traced in the same concept which identified the king with the Sun.

Nevertheless, why did the description of the Scythian festivities lay special emphasis not simply on the act of bringing the hero closer to the gold attributes, but precisely on the sleeping with these attributes? It should be noted that this was sleeping "under the sky" and it was from the sky that the sacred relics fell. As we assumed earlier, these same relics were the incarnation of the goddess Tabiti-Hestia. Perhaps it would be most natural to assume that this was matrimonial sleep, the marriage of the first Scythian king Kolaxais to the goddess of fire in the triune image of the gold objects that caught fire by themselves (I. Marazov). The different religious and mythological systems in the ancient world were very well familiar with the notion of the marriage of the king to the goddess as a means of his coming closer to the powerful divine beginning and hence as a way of obtaining royal power. Then the title of "Queen of the Scythians", which – according to Herodotus – Idanthysos awarded to the goddess Tabiti-Hestia, reflected the widespread notion in Scythia

about that goddess as the celestial bride of the Scythian king. It was precisely their marriage that constituted the content of the annual Scythian festivities.

We have yet another source that lends credibility to the proposed reconstruction. Many of the so-called royal burial mounds of the Scythians, containing burials of representatives of the higher Scythian aristocracy, revealed small gold appliques on which the same scene recurs. A standing figure of a young Scythian, drinking from a rhyton, is facing a seated Scythian matron dressed in ritual(?) clothes (*Fig. 12*). The woman is holding a round mirror in her left hand. The composition of the scene is such that the mirror is placed exactly in the middle, between the two figures. Scythologists have long come to the conclusion that the female figure depicted was one of the Scythian goddesses, and that the entire scene featured the moment of the hero's coming closer to the goddess. However, one cannot ignore the complete similarity between this scene and the wedding ritual that was customary for different peoples in the Indo-Iranian group. According to the widespread practice among these peoples, a compulsory element of the wedding ritual was for the bride and bridegroom to look into one mirror together. Such a custom existed even in ancient





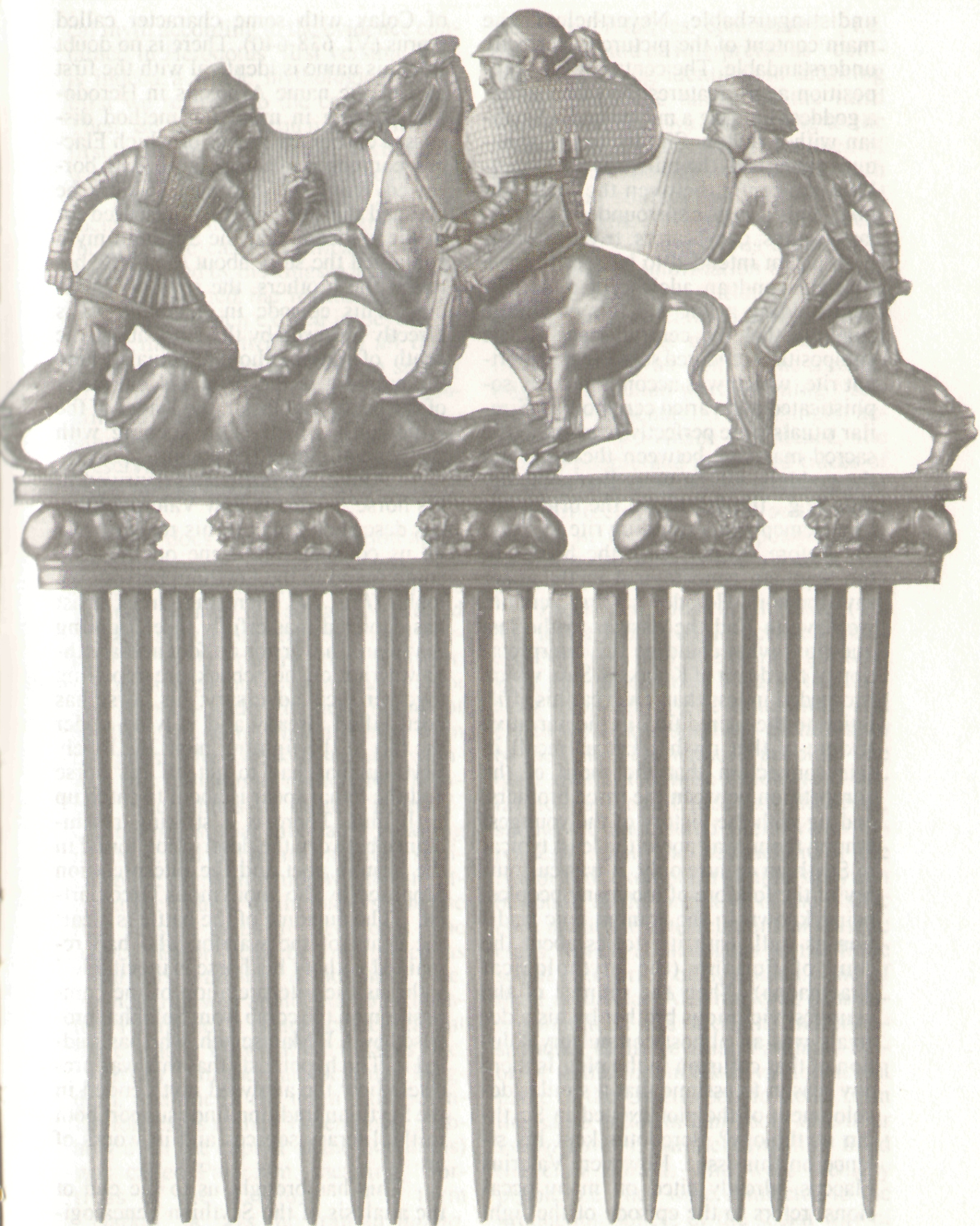
India, moreover the bride had to hold the mirror invariably in her left hand. The existence of such a rite among different Indo-Iranian peoples also suggests its very ancient origin, before the migration of these peoples, i.e. it could perfectly well have existed among the Scythians as well. The same rite also often comprised drinking from the ritual beverage together. In that case, there is every reason to assume that the very popular Scythian scene depicted on these appliques rendered in anthropomorphic images the same marriage between Tabiti and Kolaxais, which was reflected in symbolic forms in the ritual of the sleep of the Scythian king or of his temporary substitute with the sacred gold during the Scythian festivities and which gave Tabiti-Hestia the name "Queen of the Scythians".

There is yet another object which reflects the ritual of interest to us, moreover in a much more expanded and detailed form. This is the gold plaque from the tumulus near the village of Sakhnovka along the Dniepr (*Fig. 13*) and it was used apparently to decorate a hat of the type which can be seen on the female figure in the scene. The plaque is decorated with an intricate composition consisting of many figures, but unfortunately the execution is so careless that many of the details are completely

*Fig. 13. Gold plaque from the barrow near the village of Sakhnovka*

*Fig. 14. Gold comb from Solokha*







undistinguishable. Nevertheless, the main content of the picture is perfectly understandable. The centre of the composition again features the same scene: a goddess holding a mirror and a Scythian with a rhyton. Similar to the appliques examined, the mirror is also exactly in the centre, between the main figures. This group is surrounded by auxiliary figures: cup-bearers, two Scythians with a ram intended to be sacrificed, a musician and an adolescent male servant holding a fan. All this entourage suggests that the central scene in the composition rendered some very important rite, which was accompanied by sophisticated and varied ceremonies. Similar rituals were perfectly relevant to the sacred marriage between the king and the goddess, all the more that some details (e.g., the fan above the bride) betray elements of a wedding rite.

Before we part with the heroes in the Scythian genealogical myth, as we saw them in Herodotus' first version, we have to find the answer to the last question: what could be the interpretation of the death of Kolaxais-Sun, which succeeded in less than one year his affiliation to the sacred fire, in the narrative texture of that myth? Let us recall in this connection that the motif of the competition between the three brothers, ending with the victory of the youngest among them, was not in the least typical of Scythian culture only. It was customary of the folklore of too many peoples, being known in the Iranian epic tradition as well, with its stories about the sons of Feridun (the mythological Traethaona). Then the murder of the youngest victorious brother by his elder rivals was an almost compulsory solution of that collision in the plot. Is there any reason to assume that a similar development of the plot existed in Scythian mythology? Herodotus kept his silence on this issue. However, Valerius Flaccus, already cited on many occasions, refers to the episode of the fight

of Colax with some character called Aprus (VI, 638-640). There is no doubt that this name is identical with the first part of the name Arpoxais in Herodotus. Bearing in mind the method discussed earlier, by means of which Flaccus composed the motifs he had borrowed from the sources, it may be claimed that the poet had preserved for us the evidence that the Scythian myth contained the story about the battle between the brothers, the sons of Targitaos. This episode in *Argonautica* is directly followed by the story about the death of Colax, though actually here the assassin is the principal character of the poem, i.e. Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, which is in keeping with the general plot of the poem.

"Alone, wounded and deprived of his horse" – this is how Valerius Flaccus describes Colax to his readers. But let us consider the scene on the gold comb found in the Scythian barrow Solokha (Fig. 14). Here the Greek artist has depicted masterfully three fighting Scythians: a warrior on foot and another warrior on horseback are repelling together their adversary; his horse has been killed already and is lying under the feet of the fighting men; the lonely Scythian has had to get off his horse and the lethal spear is about to catch up with him. There is a striking resemblance between the description found in the Roman poet and the interpretation proposed by the anonymous Greek artist. "The outcome of the battle is clear: the death of the warrior who had remained without his horse is inevitable" – this is the interpretation of the composition on the comb from Solokha, proposed by A.P. Mantsevich, who has studied it. The hypothesis that this was precisely how the analysed myth ended in the Scythian tradition finds support both in the literary sources and in works of art.

This has brought us to the end of the analysis of the Scythian genealogi-



cal myth according to the evidence contained in Herodotus' first version. This is indeed a whole mythological cycle. First we referred to the cosmogenesis. Then we became acquainted with the first man in the Scythian mythology, whose descendents created the social and the political organization of Scythian society: they marked the beginning of the tripartite caste stratification of the Scythians, led by the kings-warriors, and they also started the institution of the three kings which existed in Scythia. It seems that the attribution of all these forms of existence of Scythian society to the mythical times from the "beginning of the world" lent a divine sanction to them, transforming the preservation of these forms into a guarantee for the stability and well-being of Scythia.

How does this interpretation agree with the evidence in the remaining versions of the Scythian myth, which – as we have pointed out already – differed substantially from the examined version? In Diodorus, the Scythian people divided into two branches – Paloi and Napoi – under the descendents of Skythes, the king who stemmed from the gods. The Greek historian examines this division as monotribal. However, the names of these "peoples" could suggest that this had a meaning in the actual Scythian tradition, similar to the division which we investigated in the course of the analysis of the first version given by Herodotus. The name "Paloi" can be interpreted as "warriors, a military detachment", i.e. its meaning was analogous to Herodotus' *Paralatae*. It is not accidental that there was a king called *Palacus*, i.e. "warrior", in the Late Scythian kingdom, and one of the main Late Scythian fortresses in the Crimea (most probably even the capital of the Scythians) was called *Palacium*, meaning "fortress of the warriors". The term "Napoi" betrays the Iranian *napha*.

meaning "relatives, community", i.e. that term could be interpreted as "commoners", being identical in meaning to the Old-Indic name for the third Varna – the *Vaiśya*. According to the evidence of a later author, Stephen of Byzantium, who was well familiar with the ancient sources about Scythia and the Scythians, "Napis is a settlement in Scythia." These words are usually interpreted as information about some concrete Scythian settlement, and a proper name is identified in them. However, this passage may be understood in another way as well: as the translation of a Scythian word meaning "settlement" in general. For example, according to V.I. Abaev's evidence, the Ossetic people had preserved traces of a cult of the deity *Naphos*, the patron and protector of every settlement, though in the past it is possible that each Ossetic village had its own *Naphos*.

The evidence in Pliny the Elder (VI, 50) about the struggle between Paloi and Napoi is also interesting, as these were two groups that lived in the Eurasian steppes during Scythian times, and ended with the destruction of the Napoi by the Paloi. The names "peoples" are quite similar to whose which are familiar to us from Diodorus. However, should we understand literally the hypothesis about the destruction of the Napoi? For example, a similar story can be found in the narrative of the Nartic epos about the interrelations of Ossetic clans, which is analogous to the three social categories of Scythians. One of these is the clan *Ahsartagkata*, possessing manhood and strength, and corresponding to the Scythian *Paralatae*-*Paloi*, or to the Indian *Kṣatriya* (the actual name of the Ossetic people stems from the same Indo-Iranian root, *ksatra* or *xsatra*-power); parallel with him lived the clan *Borata*, who were wealthy people, i.e. they were connected to the production sphere of the social way of



life, corresponding in this sense to the Katiaroi and Traspies, or to the Napoi. Among the numerous legends about the Nartes, written down by folklorists, there is also a story about the systematic extermination of the representatives of that clan by the clan of the Ahstartagkata. According to G.Dumézil's observation, this did not prevent the continued existence of the Borata clan. In folklore, this is a specific manifestation of the idea about the relations of domination and subordination among the various parts of the social organism: the victors are representatives of the social upper crust, whereas the defeated and even annihilated clan symbolized the lower social groups. Apparently, Pliny's story reflects a similar plot in Scythian folklore, confirming the social nature of the division of the Scythians into Paloi and Napoi.

But then why do the story of Diodorus and Pliny's report refer to two social categories only, because no priests have been presented here, unlike the version examined earlier? Perhaps the answer to this question can be found in Herodotus' second version about the Scythian myth. However, for this purpose it is necessary to penetrate its real meaning first by stripping it of the additional layers of the Greek treatment.

The story about the birth of the sons of Herakles is built here according to a pattern that is perfectly similar to that of the other surviving versions of the Scythian myth. But this is where the similarities end. First of all, the trial chosen for the three brothers is of an entirely different nature: they have to pull the bowstring – one of those two bows which, according to Herodotus, were previously the possession of their father, Herakles – and to strap his belt around their waist. However, the result of the test is again similar to the first version of Herodotus: it was only the youngest son who could cope with the trial, so he became the first Scythian king; the other two brothers were sent in exile.

*Fig. 15 – 16. Silver vessel from the Voronezh barrows*

This story in Scythian mythology is known to us not only from Herodotus, it has been presented in considerable detail in a series of works of art found in Scythian barrows. It can be most easily recognized on the silver spheric cup found in 1911 along the Middle Don, near the present-day town of Voronezh (*Figs. 15-19*). The cup is decorated with three double scenes, the same figures being present in all three groups. These are the long-haired bearded Scythian who is talking in turn to the remaining three persons, and this distinguishes him beyond any doubt as the principal figure in the composition. In addition to this, a number of other elements allow us to identify the scene with the content of the myth narrated by Herodotus. Only one of the scenes contains no details which could make its content more concrete: in that scene the cited principal figure is simply having a talk with the other person. But in the very next scene that other person is clearly leaving. Indeed, he is depicted standing on his knees, but this is a customary practice in Greek art of rendering the figures, when one of the participants in a scene is seated. It is particularly noteworthy that this





Scythian is holding two spears in his hands, which was the conventional way in Greek vase-painting to depict warriors who are setting off on a long march. The principal character's hand is outstretched after the departing person and his fingers indicate the number three. The content of the third scene is most expressive. Here the companion of the principal figure is beardless, with the obvious intention of indicating his youth, compared with the other figures. The principal figure is handing to that young Scythian one of his two bows (the second one is hanging on his belt).

It is rather easy to read the content of this scene: the principal hero is Herakles-Targitaos, the progenitor of the Scythians. He is rendered with each of his three sons in succession, explaining the essence of the forthcoming trial to one of them, banishing the second one from the lands after his failure to cope with the trial, indicating with his fingers the number of the brothers that had been put to the test, while the third and youngest son, who had fulfilled the task, receives one of the two bows as a symbol of his victory and of his power over Scythia.



The content of the scene under consideration shows only one essential difference from the rendering of this myth in Herodotus: in the latter case the trial is conducted not by Herakles, but by the mother of the three brothers, the "snake-legged goddess", who decides what their fate should be, banishing the unsuccessful competitors and rewarding the victor. On the vessel from Voronezh this function is performed by their father, the progenitor Herakles-Targitaos. But the difference should not surprise us: in Herodotus' narrative the adventure of Herakles in Scythia is only one brief episode in his eventful life. The hero who had accidentally happened to be there cannot wait for his sons to grow up and become men, so he goes back to Hellas soon after their birth. Naturally, the distribution of the roles in the original Scythian myth must have been totally different. In Scythia, with its stable tradition of patrilinear kinship, the most important element in the biography of the mythical first king was his origin from the deities on the father's side; it was the male ancestor who had to offer the sacral trial to the brothers and to crown the victor with power. Such is





*Fig. 17. Details of the silver vessel  
from the Voronezh barrows*

*Fig. 18 – 19. Silver vessel from the  
Voronezh barrows*









*Fig. 20. Electron vessel from Kul-Oba*

*Fig. 21. A Scythian pulling the string of a bow. Electron vessel from Kul-Oba*

*Fig. 22 – 23. The “healing scene”. Electron vessel from Kul-Oba*



consequently the rendering of the scene by the Greek artist, who apparently made the vessel as a Scythian order, obviously intended to be used for ritual purposes.

Let us consider now the vessel made of electron [an alloy of gold and silver, *translator's note*], which was found as early as in 1830 in the Kul-Oba Scythian mound (*Figs. 20-23*). This is one of the first and perhaps the most remarkable find among the vast series of objects decorated with the so-called scenes from the life of the Scythians. The composition here is divided into four autonomous groups. The first group, similar to the vessel from Voronezh, presents two conversing Scythians. But here the attention is focused on one essential detail: the head of one of the figures (undoubtedly the most senior and the most noble one) is decorated by a narrow band like a diadem, which is the symbol of royal dignity. The next scene shows the single figure of a Scythian who is pulling the string of a bow, i.e. he is performing the same action which represents the essence of the trial indicated in





the myth; the second bow (his own?) is hanging from his belt. This is followed by the two so-called healing scenes. In the first scene one of the Scythians is touching a tooth or the damaged mandible of the other Scythian; in the second scene the Scythian warrior is bandaging the knee of his wounded comrade. At a first glance, the content of these scenes is totally unrelated to the myth of interest to us. However, let us take a careful look at the way in which the pulling of the bow-string is depicted on this vessel and let us imagine the possible consequences of the unsuccessful attempt to achieve this task. As is known, the Scythian bow belongs to the category of the so-called composite weapons, which consist of several details. In a normal position, it is turned in the opposite direction to that when the bow is used in battle. If such a bow, especially when it is very tight, is being pulled by putting it under the warrior's left knee and by resting its end against the right thigh (as shown on the scene), even the smallest careless movement may cause this part

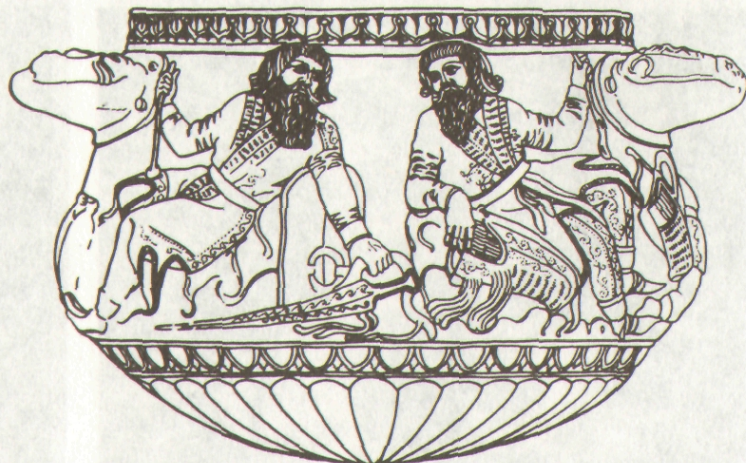
of the bow to jump. Then the wood of the bow would instantly twist outward with the entire strength of the released spring, at the same time performing a rotating movement around its point of support on the left leg. In this way the bow would hit the left part of the mandible of its owner either with the upper part of the wood, or its lower part would hit the man's left knee, i.e. exactly the injuries suggested in the scenes on the vessel from Kul-Oba.

With this in mind, we can easily decipher the content of the entire composition as depicting the same Scythian myth: in the first scene the progenitor Herakles-Targitaos explains to one of his sons the essence of the trial that he has to face; then the outcome of this trial for the three brothers is presented: success for one of them and defeat for the other two. For Herodotus, who narrated the myth, it was sufficient simply to mention the failure, without specifying its exact forms. Whereas the artist who had to depict the story inevitably had to make the narrative more con-



Fig. 24. Silver vessel from Gaymanova barrow

Fig. 25. Scenes from the frieze on a silver vessel. Gaymanova barrow



crete. Being very well familiar with the Scythian way of life and with the Scythian realia, this was a simple task for him and he visualized beautifully the content of the myth on the precious ritual vessel.

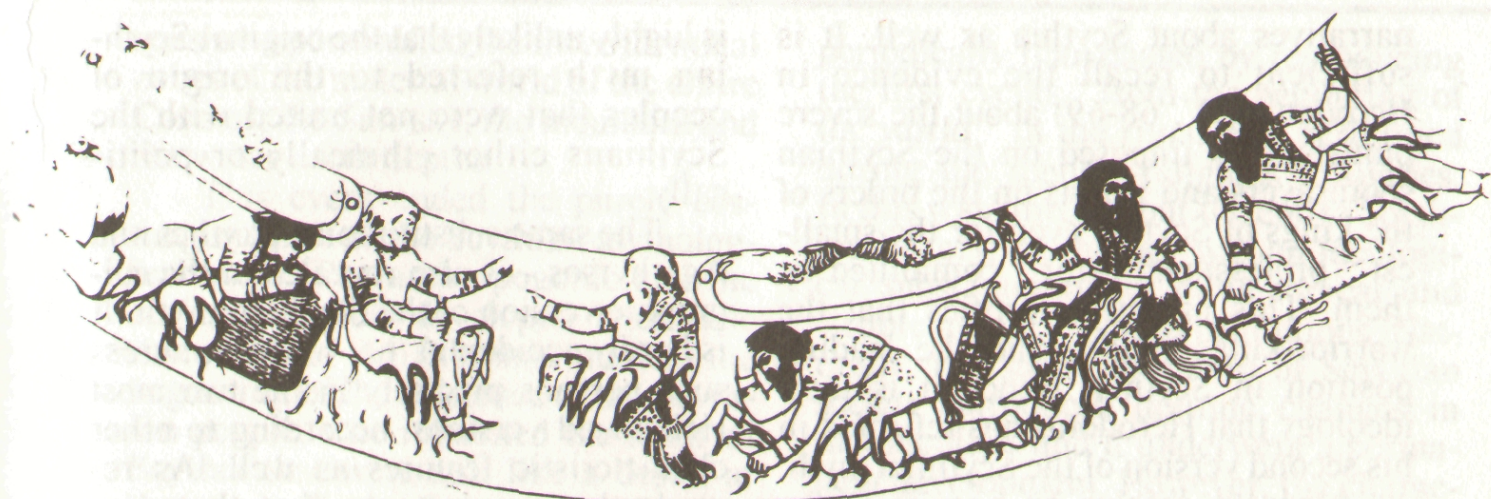
It cannot be ruled out that this myth was related to the composition on the cup found recently in the Gaymanova barrow (Figs 24, 25). Unfortunately, the main scene is badly damaged. Nevertheless, it is obvious that two Scythians are depicted, one of whom is markedly younger than the other figure, having a very short beard. His youth is also apparent from the circumstance that he is being served by a beardless youth (his figure is located behind the back of the young Scythian, below the handle of the cup), whereas the servant of the other main figure in the scene is a bearded mature Scythian. The two figures in the central scene are stretching their hands to one another. What is the meaning of this gesture? The handing of some object, e.g. of a bow, as on the vessel from Voronezh? Or simply the bringing of the younger man closer to the might and power possessed by the older one? The damaged scene prevents us from finding the answer to this question, but at any rate the pictorial solution of this problem correlates very well with the content and meaning of the myth of interest to us. On the opposite side of the vessel there is a scene which is separated from the main one: it depicts two middle-aged Scythians who are engaged in con-

versation. If we accept the proposed interpretation of the entire composition, it is easy to discern in these figures the two elder brothers of the victorious youth. The scene lacks any details that would make its content more concrete, with the only exception that its two figures are depicted with more weapons compared to the remaining persons (the central figures included). If we recall the reconstruction of the finale of Herodotus' first version as a narrative about the murdering of the younger brother by the two elder ones, and taking into account the compositional opposition of the two scenes on the cup from Gaymanova barrow, we could assume with justification that the elder sons of Herakles-Targitaos were depicted here at the moment when they were contemplating that murder.

If we accept this interpretation, the three monuments under consideration testify, first, that Herodotus presented the content of the Scythian myth sufficiently accurately, and second, that this myth was very popular in Scythia and it played an important role in its ideology, all the more that a central feature in it was the story about the trial of the three brothers and about the victory of the youngest among them. But what is the meaning of this trial?

If in the first version of Herodotus the sacred attributes sent to the brothers from heaven represented functions of the three caste groups, in the second version





the objects handed by Herakles to his sons were exclusively warrior's attributes. It is perfectly clear that the bow is an offensive weapon. As regards the second part of the trial, the strapping of the belt, the assumed difficulty of that operation, which – according to Herodotus – required habit and previous training, suggests that the trial implied the tight belt consisting of separate metal plaques, which was customary for the battle attire of Scythian soldiers and represented an element of their protective clothing in battle. Such an interpretation does not run counter to the Greek term *chososter* which Herodotus used. In this connection we would like to recall that precisely such a set of offensive and defensive weapons could be seen in the Old-Indic tradition as attributes of the Kṣatriya, the representatives of the military, unlike the Brahmans who personified the priesthood. In other words, the trial in this variant of the Scythian myth has a perfectly unambiguous "professional", i.e. military, implication. It appears then that the two trials described by Herodotus in his two versions seem to be mutually complementary: the story about the objects falling from the sky reveal which of the three social groups is called upon by the divine will to have a supreme position over the remaining two, and the conclusion was that this role was intended for the warriors. On the other hand, the trial with the weapon of Herakles was aimed at determin-

ing precisely which of the brothers was the warrior and the progenitor of the warrior caste. In principle, these are two successive stages of the same trial (whereby the second one had to precede the first); in Herodotus' narrative they proved to be divided in two versions of the myth only because they distribute differently the semantic accents, and accordingly they performed different functions in the system of the socio-political ideology of the Scythians.

Here we are confronted with an interesting detail: the second narrative of Herodotus contains evidence that a gold cup (phiale) was attached to the belt of Herakles and that this marked the beginning of the Scythian tradition of wearing a cup on one's belt. From the first version of the myth we know that such a cup was a priestly attribute. However, in the trials of Herakles' sons the cup plays no role: the victor receives it somewhat automatically, having proved that he is a warrior. Therefore, in addition to the sacred object for a warrior and the royal power, the youngest son of Herakles-Targitaos receives the priestly cup as well, and with this the right to perform the functions of a priest. This moment is not at all accidental. The entire history of the ideology of the ancient Indo-Iranian peoples abounds in examples of the rivalry between the warriors (the Kṣatriya) and the priests (the Brahmans) to attain the dominant position in society. Such a struggle is mentioned in the



narratives about Scythia as well. It is sufficient to recall the evidence in Herodotus (IV, 68-69) about the severe punishments imposed on the Scythian soothsayers and priests on the orders of the kings of Scythia even for the smallest "professional error" committed by them. This narrative testifies that the warrior-kings indeed had the leading position in Scythia. Hence it is their ideology that Herodotus has reflected in his second version of the Scythian myth.

Now we receive an answer to the question why in the variant of this myth, narrated by Diodorus, there were only two caste groups: Paloi and Napoi. The ideology reflected here had no place for the priesthood: its social position was entirely subordinated to the warriors, to the complete denial of the independent being of this caste group, which can be seen in the Scythian social nomenclature concerning the brothers-progenitors, preserved in the works of Diodorus.

It remains to note a specificity of the second version of Herodotus. We saw that its entire content reflects the same social theme that is so clearly felt in the first version. This is the story about the formation of the caste organization of Scythian society, about the establishing of the power of the warrior-kings. The images of the progenitor-brothers should also have a meaning accordingly. Incidentally, in Herodotus they seem to play a totally different role, being progenitors and eponyms of three unrelated peoples: Scythians, Agathyrsos and Gelonoi. Such an obvious discrepancy leads us to believe that we have come across a Greek interpretation of the myth. It was precisely the Greeks who substituted the ethnographic content of the legend for the social content, associating the three peoples living along the Northern Pontic coast with the three brothers. Actually, such an assumption could be expressed even before we analysed the nature of the trial: each people has its own myths about its origin and it

is highly unlikely that the original Scythian myth referred to the origin of peoples that were not united with the Scythians either ethnically or politically.

The same substitution – Skythes and Agathyrsos – is also revealed in the epigraphic version of the Scythian myth. It is hardly accidental that we come across such persons precisely in the two most Hellenized versions, according to other characteristic features as well. As regards the circumstance that there are two and not three brothers in the epigraphic version, here one can assume the existence of the same structure which we discovered in the myth told by Diodorus. However, this source does not provide concrete data in confirmation of such an interpretation.

Let us summarize the results of the analysis of the Scythian genealogical myth. Indeed, we are faced with a complex mythological cycle which reflects the notions of the Scythians about the successive stages in the formation of the Universe. Its first unit is the description of the cosmogony through the story about the deeds of the gods, in which different elements of the Cosmos are personified. According to Scythian mythology, the creation of the Universe was not a series of purpose-oriented acts of construction, but a chain of births, which is generally intrinsic to the most archaic myths. According to the notions of the Scythians, the marriage of heaven with Earth-water gave birth to a person who incarnated the middle world. This birth transformed the Cosmos into a structure consisting of three zones or worlds organized along the vertical. The deity in which the middle element of this structure is personified was at the same time the first man. He performed a number of heroic deeds to purge the planet from the chthonic monsters that incarnated the primeval chaos, and then the incest marriage with his own mother – Earth-water – resulted in the birth of three



sons who personified the three identical zones of the material world of the entire Cosmos: the Sun-sky, the mountain and the water-earth depths.

This event ended the purely cosmogonic part of the Scythian mythological cycle. The anthropogonic and the sociogonic plots developed later. The three sons of the first man marked the beginning of the existence of the Scythian people, who inhabited the lands of Scythia that were still like a desert at that time. Each of them was the progenitor of a definite social category of Scythian society, of a caste group. This social structure reproduced the cosmic model. In the course of the trial sent to them by the gods, the belonging of each of the brothers to a concrete caste became clear and the divine sanctioning of the domination of the warriors in that social organization became apparent. The bringing of the progenitor of that caste closer to the sacred gold attributes that incarnated the triune fire deity, guaranteed the royal power over Scythia both to him and to his posterity. His sons started the Scythian institution of the three kings, its structure being called upon to reproduce the tripartite structure of the Cosmos.

Through the story about the formation of the natural and of the social Cosmos, this mythological cycle describes its structure and thus serves as a means of expressing the widespread concepts in Scythia about the world order sent by the gods, and as a means of handing this knowledge down from one generation to the next. It was precisely the reference to the mythological precedents, to the fact that the structure in question originated from the fabulous times of the progenitors, which was interpreted in Scythia as evidence of the divine sanction for the protection of the stability and inviolability of this sociopolitical organization, which is a guarantee for the welfare and flourishing of Scythian society. This organization was

periodically rejuvenated by reproducing the first events "from the beginning of the world" in the ritual acts performed during the regular religious festivities. In this way, throughout the entire Scythian history, mythology was an ideological substantiation of quite topical and "contemporary" social institutions. Naturally, the social evolution of Scythian society introduced definite changes in that ideology and it underwent a permanent development. However, the character of the sources at our disposal allows to perceive the character and the content of these changes only in the least degree. Some aspect of this problem will be discussed later in this book.



# The Mythological Concept about Space

In the previous chapter we became convinced that the myths making up the genealogical cycle under consideration describe predominantly the vertical structure of the Universe and that usually its tripartite organization was reproduced in the hierarchic structure of Scythian social and political institutions. In order to obtain a relatively comprehensive idea about the Scythian mythological model of the world, it is now necessary to understand how the Universe looked in its horizontal section, so to say, according to the widespread notions in Scythia. In other words, how the Scythians interpreted the macrospace which they inhabited: the entire "land of the Scythians", that peculiar arena of events from their real and mythical history, as well as every microspace in which all socially significant events took place. In order to understand the nature of the concepts dominating in this myth, it is necessary to gain a deeper insight into history.

The striving to give a meaning to space and to "organize" it to some degree has been intrinsic to man since the earliest stages in his existence, having been guided predominantly by purely practical needs of orientation within the territory inhabited by each individual community. Initially, every time a man went out hunting, he had to think about returning safely to his relatives. Even at the dawn of his history, man made for himself a more or less permanent dwelling, which became a relatively stable point of orientation for movement in all directions. Every itinerary became movement "from home" with a subsequent "return home", to a definite point that was strictly localized in space. The entire system of movements of the members of a community represents the sum of vectors originating from one point, as a result of which the orientation of the socium in the space inhabited by it acquired a central-radial character as a whole. However, the need to repeat the



same itineraries again and again, to be able to determine in advance the direction of the movement in each concrete case, and to create a comprehensive model of the territory conquered by the community, made this system of orientation insufficient. Parallel with the growing awareness of the radial character of all vectors of the itineraries, it became necessary to characterize each vector by means of concrete and sufficiently stable features. The simplest way of attaining this goal was to associate each of the itineraries with real points of orientation in Nature. This system, however, had a purely local effect and moreover it required the memorizing of innumerable such guidelines and points of orientation. It could be applied and was probably widely applicable for any concrete case, but a qualitatively new approach to space was required, if it was to be raised to a more general, "conceptual", level.

In order to create such general principles to describe space, that space – initially amorphous and homogeneous – had to be differentiated and structured to a certain extent, identifying some directions that could be used as guidelines in it. As E.Cassirer proved in the past, such a conceptual structuring of space is based on man's intuitive perceptions about his body and about the situation of the world surrounding him with a view to himself. And that perception created prerequisites for dividing the world around man (actually surrounding him, in the real sense of that word) into four sectors corresponding to the positions: "in front of me", "behind me", "on the right" and "on the left" (in fact, these are two pairs of opposite directions). But in order to attribute a universal and constant character to these four directions, which would not depend on the momentary position of the individual in space, the same quadripartite structure was linked to the relatively stable and universal point of orientation in Na-

ture, i.e. to the Sun's position in the sky at different hours of the day (later during different seasons as well). This led to the concept about the four parts of the world, which split the "Earth's circle" and gave it a definite organization. This concept has determined to this day both the way in which man finds his way in the space inhabited by him, and geography as a whole, irrespective of how extensive the land accessible to human knowledge was during the different stages of history. According to E.Cassirer, there is no cosmology – however primitive – in which the opposing of the four cardinal directions in the world was not manifested in one way or another as a key principle for understanding and explaining the world. The notion about the four sides of the world became a key element in the interpretation of various aspects of everyday life. Hence different symbols were correlated with them. We already mentioned the four deities who acted as guardians of the four cardinal directions in the world, forming apparently the third level of the deities in the Scythian pantheon. Further below we shall examine the other ways used to mark the cardinal directions, widespread in Scythian culture.

According to the mythological notions, the centre of the cross-like figure formed by the four vectors oriented towards the cardinal directions, was that point through which the *axis mundi* passed. That axis represented the vertical organization of space. Thus the two subsystems of the spatial model of the world – horizontal and vertical – became united in a common structure. We shall note also that in the opinion of specialists, the summing of the "horizontal four" with the "vertical three", as structures reproducing the structure of the Universe in all its complexity, gave rise to the widespread idea about the week as a sacral number which fully corresponds to the image of the Universe. This has found expression in the



mentioned Indo-Iranian tradition of worshipping the heptatheistic pantheon.

Consequently, the notion about the horizontal structure of the world in archaic cultures was determined basically by two moments: by its centric character, i.e. by the opposition between the centre and the periphery, and by the four cardinal and key directions, which could be correlated to the four directions of the world. However, mythological thinking attributed a specificity to that model: it perceived space organized in such a way as being nonhomogeneous in terms of both structure and quality, attributing positive or negative characteristics to its various parts. Such an interpretation is best explained for the centre and for the periphery. The centre – this is the localization of the individual perceiving space, and of the entire community to which this individual belonged. Consequently, this is a familiar, mastered and relatively safe zone, this is “home”. Naturally, positive characteristics were ascribed to this zone and it was opposed to everything outside it. The further away man went from his “own world”, the less protected he felt, the weaker his links with the community became, with all intrinsic modes of behaviour, customary or prompted by tradition, the more strongly he felt the unordered and chaotic beginning (from his point of view). The logical consequence of such a perception was the forming of the notion that there was a zone of absolute chaos near the outer limits of the world, opposing in every way man’s “own” world. Hence the practically universal interpreting for archaic cosmologies of the centre and the periphery as “same” and “alien”, as order and chaos, life and death, humans and hostile daemons. In the centric system of the Universe, its different zones are characterized by a high degree of sacrality, depending on their distance to the centre. Somewhere near the end of the world was the entrance to the world

beyond, the realm of death. Within the confines of man’s “own” world, the proper centre was endowed with maximal sacrality, being the point through which the world’s axis passes and in which the contact with the other zones of the vertical subsystem, and especially with the world of the gods, was most accessible. For this reason, it concentrated everything that was sacred to the community: the sanctuary, the temple and the altar.

The notion about the qualitative inhomogeneity of space, characterizing its centric model, spread to the four sides of the world as well. Hence the areas localized in different directions from the centre also acquired positive or negative characteristics. However, a greater variability of the concepts inherent to the different cultural traditions was observed in this sphere: too many factors (moreover transformed in different ways by mythological thinking) influenced the formation of the respective notions. As a whole, the archaic perception of space was characterized both by universal features, typical of different cultures, and by specific and strictly individual features. Whenever a mythology is examined, it is necessary to reproduce the concepts that are inherent to it in that respect in full detail. We shall examine Scythian tradition from this perspective.

Let us start with an analysis of the monument in which the key aspects of Scythian mythology are sufficiently well visualized. Among the so-called Scythian standards, whose purpose and ritual functions will be discussed a little later, it is interesting to note two practically identical specimens that had been found in different regions of Scythia. The standard found near the present-day town of Dnepropetrovsk, from the Lysaya Gora barrow, is better preserved (*Fig. 26*). This is a bronze object which is attached to a vertical wooden staff by means of an insert. Its central element is a naked male figure placed on a small “pedes-



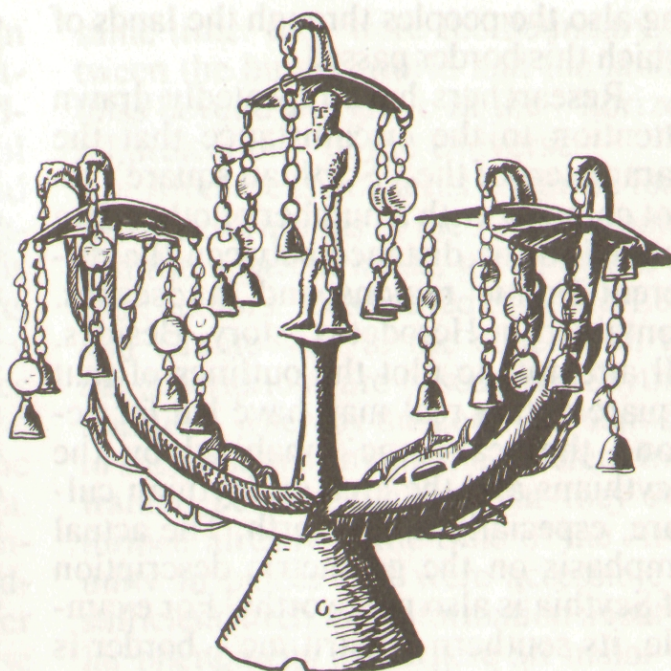


Fig. 26. Bronze standard.  
Lysaya Gora

tal'' immediately above the insert, probably the image of some Scythian deity. Four little horns twisted to point outward start from this "pedestal" to form a cross. Figures of birds with spread wings are fixed on the tips of these horns (as well as above the head of the deity). Chains with little bells are hanging from the wings and the beaks of the birds, as well as from the hands of the deity. In the middle part of each of the horns one can see sculpted images of some animals (wolves?), which seem to be moving from the centre in the four directions. As a whole, the composition correlates well with the cosmological model: the male figure personifies the centre of the Universe, i.e. the *axis mundi*; the zoomorphic symbols serve to oppose the upper, celestial world (the birds) to the terrestrial one (the wolves); parallel with this, their repetition four times on the horns pointing to the four directions, attributes a horizontal structure to space. Opinions among Scythologists vary on the interpretation of the deity depicted on the standard. Ensuing from the circumstance that his figure is slightly raised above the basis of the horns and is practically at the same level with the birds, he could be identified with the celestial deity Papaïos. Conversely, as-

suming that this deity served as an element linking the level of the Earth and that of the sky, being at the same time in the centre of the terrestrial world, then this was more likely to be the personification of this world, i.e. the god and the first man Targitaos. The image lacks reliable diagnostic features that would give more weight to one interpretation compared to the other.

Let us turn now to a different type of source. In describing Scythia, Herodotus (IV, 101) reports that it resembles a square, the length of each side being equal to a 20 days' journey or 4,000 stadia. According to Herodotus, the border of this "Scythian square" was the Pontic coast to the south, and to the east – the Maeotis (the Azov Sea) and the Tanais (pres. Don) river flowing into it. The southwestern corner of that square was the Istros (pres. Danube) delta, and – judging by the context – this was the river perceived by Herodotus as the western side of the "Scythian square" (cf. IV, 48), although actually the Danube flows mainly along the width of the square, not in a meridional direction. The historian has not given the geographic characteristics of the northern boundary of Scythia, reporting only its distance from the southern border on the sea, and list-



ing also the peoples through the lands of which this border passed.

Researchers have repeatedly drawn attention to the circumstance that the parameters of the "Scythian square" do not coincide with a number of other data related to the distance between the different Pontic regions and landscapes, contained in Herodotus' story. Besides, all attempts to plot the outlines of that square onto a real map have led far beyond the real zone inhabited by the Scythians and the area of Scythian culture, especially to the north. The actual emphasis on the geometric description of Scythia is also noteworthy. For example, its southern – maritime – border is not a straight line at all. All this suggests that Herodotus did not present a real geographic picture, but a purely artificial, conceptual construct. But what was its origin? It has been claimed to be based on the cartographic skills of Herodotus and on his striving to order and organize the entire world described by him, attributing to it a certain symmetrical quality. However, such a clear geometrization of geography is not detected in any other part of Herodotus' narrative. According to another viewpoint, the historian introduced the concept of the "Scythian square" in order to illustrate better his descriptions of developments in the Scythian-Persian War. Indeed, the route of the two enemy armies, as described in the story of Herodotus (IV, 121-135), practically coincides with the perimeter of the "Scythian square": initially they moved from the Istros to the east of its southern, maritime border. Then, having crossed the Tanaïs, they turned north and passed through the lands of all those peoples, who – according to earlier information (IV, 100) – were adjacent to the "Scythian square". Finally, turning south, they returned to Scythia and again came to the lower course of the Istros. However, bearing in mind that Herodotus undoubtedly borrowed the information about the

course of the Scythian-Persian war mainly from Scythian oral tradition (which is confirmed by a number of specificities in his story), the natural assumption would be that the idea about the square contour of Scythia was not his, but that it could again be traced back to that tradition, reflecting the notions of the Scythians themselves about the configuration of their country. In the consciousness of the archaic communities, their own land was always a synonym of the ordered world, hence the passage of interest to us actually reflects Scythian cosmological notions. In fact, the entire square was perceived as the simplest model of ordered space, if its structure was based on the same idea about the four sides of the world as cardinal directions which characterize that world.

We shall note likewise that the idea about the quadrangular land was apparently traditional to the ancient Iranians: it was also reflected in the geography of Avesta, where one of the countries created by Ahuramazda has been characterized in a similar way. It is curious that, according to Avesta, the native land of the mythical figure Tracthaona – father of three sons who defeated the chthonic monster Až Dahak, i.e. the hero resembling Targitaos, who was born in quadrangular Scythia – also had quadrangular outlines.

If we accept the assumption about the cosmological sources of the idea on the "Scythian square", we should draw attention to one specificity of the notions about the geography of Eastern Europe, which were widespread in the ancient world. Describing the lands to the north of Scythia, Greek and Roman authors are unanimous about the existence of a mountain range stretching in width, the actual Rhipaci Montes, whose name – as we saw in the previous chapter – was related to the name of Lipoxais, the Scythian progenitor of the caste of priests. In fact, no such mountain range existed in Northeastern Eu-



rope, and there is a growing certainty in modern research that this notion reflected in a distorted form the vague knowledge of the ancient world about the Ural Mountains. G.M. Bongard-Levin and E.A. Grantovskiy have adopted an essentially different approach to the analysis of this evidence: having analysed all its variants in the ancient literature, they have detected in it striking coincidences with the mythological picture of the world, as it has been presented in the ancient monuments of Iran and India. Here, too, the notions about the mountains localized along the northern boundary of the inhabitable world, are rather stable and the characterization of these mountains is very eloquent, being similar both in the Indic and in the Iranian tradition. On the one hand, tradition is linked to these mountains through perfectly real natural phenomena which may be observed in the polar regions: the northern lights that last day and night for six months, the stable position of the North Star in the firmament, etc. On the other hand, purely mythological features can be perceived in the characterization of these mountains: they rise to the skies, the gods live on their highest peaks (it is not accidental that the polar day and night, each lasting for six months, are interpreted as the "days and nights" of the gods), the celestial bodies move around them, all big rivers of the planet spring from them, and in the Milky Sea, which presumably existed beyond these mountains, there was an island identified with the land of the blessed: no mortal person could reach that land, and whoever went there, could never return to lands inhabited by mortals. In other words, the northern mountains in the Indo-Iranian tradition had all the characteristic features of the World Mountain, which in turn was one of the incarnations of the world's axis; they formed the link between the world of human beings and the world of the gods in the vertical structure of the Universe. At the

same time, they were the boundary between the human world and the land of bliss beyond the grave in the "horizontal projection" of the Universe.

All these characteristics can be found in the descriptions of the Rhipaei montes and the adjacent lands, given by the ancient authors. This has led Bongard-Levin and Grantovskiy to the conclusion that the descriptions are based on a Scythian tradition, whereby the common elements in such notions among the different Indo-Iranian peoples suggest that they were formed already at the time of the Aryan unity in places that were accessible for sufficiently reliable information about polar phenomena and where all major rivers flow from the north to the south: only such a geographic situation could contribute to the emergence of the notion about the high mountains stretching along the entire northern border of the inhabitable world. Only the territory of Eastern Europe meets these requirements, which is not unimportant for clarifying the acutely debatable issue about the exact localization of the original homeland of the Indo-Iranian peoples. However, at present we are interested not so much in the importance of these observations for the solving of the "Aryan problem", but rather in their contribution to the reconstruction of the Scythian mythological picture of the world. The Scythian notions reflected in the ancient literature suggest that "horizontal space" in Scythia was interpreted in connection with the notion about the vertical structure of the world, which was characteristic of Scythian mythology, while the mythical geography of the Scythians served as a peculiar instrument for coordinating the vertical and the horizontal subsystems of the cosmological model. The *southern* border of the "Scythian square" was simultaneously interpreted as the *lower* border as well, being at the same time the boundary between the inhabited world and the sea – the element of the cosmic "below", i.e. of the chthonic zone. Its *northern* boundary



was the *peak* of the inhabited land, and at the same time the mountains rising to the skies served as the abode of the gods (it is not accidental that they had the same names as the mythical progenitor of the priests). Even this characteristic feature betrays the notion about the qualitative inhomogeneity of the North and South. This becomes even clearer in the narratives of the peoples living to the north of Scythia, near the northern boundaries of the Earth. And finally, the foothills of the Rhipaci Montes were inhabited by the tribe of the Argippaioi, which – according to Herodotus (IV, 23) – was worshipped as being sacred and therefore none of the people offended them. The Argippaioi did not know wars, they were the most just, and they acted as intermediaries in the settling of all disputes that arose among adjacent peoples, in addition to providing refuge for every person who sought their protection. According to the information in other ancient authors, beyond the Rhipaci Montes lived the blessed people of the Hyperboreans (information about them was available to Herodotus as well, but the rational mind of the father of history assessed them rather critically). The legends about the Hyperboreans became an integral element of the ancient tradition, having merged with the authentic Greek mythological motifs, and more specifically with the Apollo cult. Nevertheless, they also betray the local colour, especially in the light of the cited Indo-Iranian notions about the Land of the Blessed, localized somewhere beyond the sacred northern mountains. The Hyperboreans were presented precisely as such a blessed people in the stories about the northern neighbours of Scythia. It is also reported that the people had no access to the land of the Hyperboreans, because it was guarded by monstrous mythical creatures – griffins. In some ancient sources they are described as lions having an eagle's head and wings, i.e. precisely the image which – as we shall see later – was very wide-

Fig. 27. *Bronze cauldron from Chertomlyk*

Fig. 28. *Bronze cauldron from Razkopana Mogila*

spread in the numerous monuments of Graeco-Scythian art. Scythian art is familiar with other treatments of the fantastic griffins as well. According to the information in the works of the ancient authors, the Arimaspoi – the people who constantly fought against them – lived in the neighbouring lands to the griffins. According to Herodotus (IV, 27), the name of these people in Scythian meant "one-eyed". However, such an interpretation has not been confirmed by linguistic analysis, suggesting rather the presence of the already familiar Iranian root *aspa*, meaning "horse" (incidentally, some ancient sources refer to animosity between griffins and horses; the same motif is known in the pictorial art of Scythia as well). The actual characterization of the Arimaspoi as one-eyed indisputably stems from Scythian mythology. V.I. Abaev has compared this mythical people to the one-eyed giants in the Ossetic epic tradition of the Vayugi, who guarded the entrance to the world beyond. Similar motifs have been found in other Indo-Iranian traditions as well. The very circumstance that the Arimaspoi were one-eyed corresponds to their localization at the borderline between the earth-





ly world and the one beyond, because the mythology of the different peoples associates the world beyond with the notion of blindness, whereas the possession of one eye only was interpreted as a kind of half-blindness.

Consequently, in the description of Scythia by the ancient geographers and writers one can discern a substantial layer concerning the mythological notions of the Scythians themselves about organized space and about the qualitative inhomogeneity of its different zones. Is there any evidence about how the Scythian environment interpreted the "centre of the world", i.e. that point which possesses the maximum sacrality, through which the world's axis passes, and which – as was mentioned already – usually coincided with the main sacred place of one society or another? According to the evidence in Herodotus (IV, 59), the Scythians did not erect altars and temples to their gods, with the exception of the altars dedicated to Ares in all regions, which were already discussed in the first chapter. As was mentioned already, the structure of these altars reflected the same notion about the structure of space: it is manifested in the

quadrangular configuration of the altar and in the presence of the sword thrust into it, performing the function of the axis of the world. Perhaps the ancient tradition has preserved for us the description of some Pan-Scythian ritual centre as well?

In this context it is interesting to consider yet another evidence given by Herodotus (IV, 81). According to his story, there was a time when the Scythian king Ariantas wished to know the exact number of his subjects, so he gave orders to each Scythian to bring one bronze arrowhead, and from them he cast an enormous cauldron, which at the time of Herodotus was in the area called Exampaaios, between the rivers Hypanis (Southern Bugh) and Borystheneis. Similar cauldrons (though much smaller) have been found frequently in Scythian barrows (*Figs 27, 28*). The story about the origin of the cauldron of Ariantas testifies that it was perceived as a Pan-Scythian sanctuary. The cup, the vessel (including the cauldron) are among the usual incarnations of the "centre of the world". The sacral character of the cauldron in question is also confirmed by the circumstance that the Greeks referred



to the area where it was localized as the "Sacred Routes". Hence this cauldron was most probably placed in some sanctuary which was worshipped by all Scythians. After analysing the evidence from the sources about this area, K.K.Shilik, specialist in historical geography of the Northern Pontic area, came to the conclusion that it was most probably located at one of the major crossroads on the ancient trade routes passing through the territory of Scythia and heading to the northeast, and he cites four places where this sanctuary could be feasibly localized. It was precisely at one of these points – close to the present-day city of Kirovgrad – that archaeologists studied a very interesting construction at the end of the 19th century. This was a large barrow, surrounded by piled up earth, in which there were four entrances forming a cross. Each entrance was shaped by a pair of additional embankments, which seemed to surround the road leading to the barrow. Only the northern entrance to that construction was different, being surrounded by three pairs of embankments, not one. Judging by everything, the central barrow of this elaborate construction was not intended for burial purposes, on the analogy of most barrows in the Pontic region; the efforts of archaeologists to discover a burial here failed. Therefore, one should apparently seek some other ritual purpose of that barrow.

It is interesting to note the direct association between the plan of the described construction and the discussed Scythian notions about the structure of space. It was essentially a gigantic cosmogram. The central tumular embankment was the model of the World Mountain, one of the incarnations of the *axis mundi*. The four entrances to the space surrounded by embankments correlate with the four cardinal directions in the world. The monumental northern entrance, however, was probably prompted by the widespread Scythian notion about

the North as the zone where the gods lived. And precisely at the central point of such a construction, at the top of the "World Mountain", one would expect to find the gigantic cauldron of king Arian-tas – the sacred vessel used for ritual ceremonies practised by all Scythians.

Many Scythologists claim that the most festive and important cult activities of the Scythians, e.g. the calendar festivities described in the previous chapter, were performed in the sacred area of Exampaia. The described construction, which reproduces the structure of the Cosmos, may have been intended for these festive occasions. It is not possible to date this construction accurately. Only the objects from the disturbed burial, placed in the southern part of the ring-like embankment when the entire monumental construction already existed, testify that at least it was not younger than the Scythian period. Unfortunately, the construction had not survived to our days and it is not possible to verify the proposed interpretation through a comprehensive study.

We saw the correlation of the mythological notions about space with the ideas of the Scythians about the land inhabited by them, about its configuration and about the qualitative characteristics of its various parts. However, the specificity of the archaic views about space consists in the fact that the structural specificities ascribed to space as a whole were supposed to be inherent to a concrete microspace as well: each activity could be successful only if it took place in organized space reproducing the structure of the Cosmos. If the territory inhabited by the community was implied (the town, village or individual dwelling), only such a structure – according to the notions of ancient man – guaranteed the prosperity of that community; if that was some sepulchral construction, it was needed in order to guarantee the existence of the deceased in the world beyond; if it was a place where





**Fig. 29. Archers. Gold appliqué from Kul-Oba**

some religious rituals were performed, the very compliance with that requirement gave rise to expectations that the rituals would be successful. This required some preliminary rites which essentially transformed each such microspace into something like a model of the Cosmos, identifying for the purpose a point in it, which was functionally identical to the "centre of the world", surrounding it with the radial directions, marked in one way or another, and corresponding to the cardinal directions.

Virtually no descriptions of such Scythian rites have been preserved in written sources about Scythia. Here it is possible to find only indirect hints about them, understandable only in the light of other data. However, monuments of pictorial art and some objects of a cult nature, analysed in the light of typological analogies, allows some insight into some of these ritual acts.

Several gold appliques featuring the figures of two archers with their bows, standing with their backs to one another and shooting in the opposite directions, have been found in the already mentioned Scythian barrow of Kul-Oba (Fig. 29). It is not possible to decide what object in the burial was decorated with these appliques, because they were found near the tomb wall, mixed with other

small items of adornment. Even data about how many of these appliques have been found are lacking. Most probably they were used to decorate the curtains and the clothing hanging on the walls of the tomb. Nevertheless, the scene depicted on these appliques merits our attention.

At first glance, this is a typically military episode. However, such an interpretation would seem totally unconvincing, if we look more closely into the depicted situation. The bow is a weapon suitable exclusively for fighting at a distance, and its use is pointless if the enemy has come so close to the soldiers and has surrounded them from all sides, so that they are compelled to defend themselves with their backs to one another. Apparently, such a scene would be unthinkable in real battle. But it becomes sufficiently comprehensible, if it is examined in the light of the rituals that existed among many ancient peoples. In India, China and Japan, as well as among the peoples of Africa, there was a practice of shooting arrows to the four directions of the world during different ritual ceremonies. Sometimes five or even six arrows (instead of four) were shot: arrows were sent both to the zenith and sometimes to the nadir, to the ground. It is easy to note that the direction in which



the arrows were sent coincided with the main vectors used in archaic cultures for organizing and structuring of the surrounding space. Such a choice of organizing space is quite easily explainable: it not only had to order a certain zone in space, but it also had to express the thought about its complete security and safety from all possible sides.

We have every reason to assume that such a situation was depicted on the appliques of interest to us. Indeed, only a double and not a quadruple shooting has been shown here. But this is already a specific feature of the way in which pictorial actions of this type were depicted: in the frontal composition it was rather difficult to show figures facing not only to the right and left, but also to the onlooker and in the opposite direction. Moreover, this would have complicated the scene too much. As a rule, artists preferred to simplify such compositions, to reduce the elements in them to only two symmetrical elements out of the essentially quadripartite structure. Later we shall come across other cases of such a reduction as well.

We have no information about the cases in which the Scythians resorted to such a ritual mode of organizing space, which appears on the appliques from Kul-Oba. There is no doubt that the idea of security and safety was prominent, when the structure of the territory of the kingdom and accordingly the rituals connected with the personality of the king were implied. It is not accidental that the appliques in question were found in one of the so-called "royal" Scythian barrows: all grave goods in the barrow of Kul-Oba show that some Scythian dynast was buried there. Rituals similar to the one described were associated precisely with the king and his successor – in India, in China, and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, we have an indirect evidence about such a semantic value of the arrows shot with a bow in a Scythian environment. It is contained in the repeatedly cited narrative of Herodotus

*Fig. 30. Bronze standard from Ulskiy barrow*

*Fig. 31. A griffin. Bronze standard from the Krasnokutsk barrow*

about the Scythian-Persian War (IV, 126-135). When Darius, convinced of his military superiority over his enemy, asked the Scythian king Idanthyrsos to surrender and to show his humility by "coming to his master with land and water", the angry Idanthyrsos promised him not land and water, but such gifts as he deserved. And after waiting for the Persian army to fall into a sufficiently severe predicament, the Scythian king sent to Darius a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows. At first, the Persians were at a loss and did not know how to interpret these symbolic gifts: Darius himself was inclined to see in them a sign of Scythian docility, but his followers interpreted them as a threat. The course of events later showed that the latter explanation showed the real meaning of the gifts sent by Idanthyrsos. The "zoomorphic symbols" included in these gifts will be discussed in the next chapter. As regards the five arrows, they





were directly correlated to the noted ritual acts and meant complete inviolability (from all sides) of the Scythians and of Scythia by the Persians, because they were protected by Scythian weapons.

Scythian standards, which were mentioned briefly already, form another series of Scythian monuments connected with the rituals of the sacralization of space. This was the name used for bronze, less frequently iron objects, designed to be fixed to some stick, and often decorated with sculptures of some animal, an anthropomorphic figurine, or (very seldom) with an entire composition with many figures (*Figs 30, 31*). Most of the standards also had a little bell with apertures, or hanging bells. Scythologists have been arguing for many decades about the functions of these objects. It was suggested that they should be viewed as distinctive features of the Scythian military leaders, as gad-

gets to prevent the reins of the horses from becoming tangled, as decorative elements on the burial chariot or hearse, and even as musical attributes in shamanic rituals. However, the majority of these explanations cannot account for a characteristic feature of Scythian standards, namely the fact that they were usually found in definite numbers in the burials: one, two or (most frequently) four identical specimens, in many cases together with details from a horse's bridle. The comprehensive study of the conditions in which all Scythian standards from the complex had been found, of the way in which they were fixed to the staff, as well as the repertory of the pictorial motifs decorating them, recently led E.V.Perevodchikova and the author of the present book to the conclusion that these objects crowned the ritual poles erected in the centre or in the corners of some microspace, and that they were



used to incarnate the so-called "world pillars" or "world tree". The world tree was among the most important images in the mythological picture of the world in the different archaic traditions. Its vertical structure is called upon to represent the vertical structure of the Cosmos: the roots of the tree corresponded to the lower, chthonic world, its trunk corresponded to the middle world, its crown – to the upper, celestial world. In the horizontal projection of the world, such a tree was perceived as being localized in the central point, and it was considered to be one of the materializations of the *axis mundi*; four additional trees were placed around the centre so as to form a cross, and they corresponded to the four sides of the world. In other words, the image of the world tree had to structure space again in accordance with the pattern discussed above. The ritual pillars crowned with Scythian standards served to make some space sacral in that way, attributing to it a structure that imitated that of the Cosmos. They were erected in the centre of that space (for example, such a central pillar was decorated by the cited standard with the four horns from Lysaya Gora), or in the four corners. The space to be sacralized could be the platform intended for sacrifices and other rituals, the territory on which the burial had to take place, and even the chariot with which the deceased was driven around the lands of his clan prior to the burial. In a number of cases such ritual pillars performed simultaneously the role of sacrificial pillars as well, hence in ancient India the sacrificial pillar was directly interpreted as being equivalent to the world tree. The description of the sacrificial pillar given in the *Rigveda* (III, 8, 10) is very similar to a pillar decorated with a Scythian standard. In all probability, the use of such sacrificial poles in the Scythian rituals explains the numerous finds of standards (including in series of four specimens)

together with details of horse-trappings, because horses were known to have been the principal sacrificial animals in Scythia. We cannot state with certainty the time when the sacralization of the microspace took place by erecting ritual poles decorated with standards. There is no doubt that this practice was widespread in burial rites, but apparently not only there. For example, in the Carpathian-Danubian basin, where the practice of using Scythian-type standards was also quite popular, they were found almost invariably together with elements of horse-trappings, though – as a rule – not related to burials. It is possible that for the mobile military forces of the Scythians, penetrating into Central Europe, the erecting of such pillars on the ritual platform replaced the traditional Scythian altars, from which the warriors had been separated in the course of their long campaign into distant lands.

We examined the two ways in which Scythian culture reproduced the image of organized space, imitating the mythological cosmic model. It is perfectly obvious that the idea of cosmic order played an important role in the life of Scythian society. So far we are not familiar by far with all cases and ways of its updating. Specialists are about to undertake another interesting analysis of all burials, with a view to elucidating the links between the mythological understanding of space and the burial practices of the Scythians. The existence of such a link is corroborated even by the sufficiently stable orientation to the cardinal directions both of the actual burials, and of the sepulchral constructions in Scythia, as well as by the openly cross-like configuration of some of these constructions, notably the catacombs in the famous Chertomlyk circle.

Perception of space was one of the key aspects of the mythological world outlook, and one of the essential ways of mastering it is to attribute to it a structure that would imitate the cosmic model.



# Scythian Mythology and the Animal Style

So far we have considered numerous fragments from the ancient literature, containing information about the Scythian narrative myths, or reflecting in one form or another the mythological concepts of the Scythians. In spite of the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the available evidence, this analysis allows us to reproduce a sufficiently complete picture of typical Scythian notions about the structure of the Universe. It is not at all accidental that we have focused our attention precisely on that aspect of Scythian mythology, just as it is not accidental that it has been best and most fully clarified in the available sources. This is explained with the role which cosmology played for the world outlook of the archaic peoples, whose spiritual and cultural life was generally determined by mythological thinking. These people believed that the structure of the Cosmos was a kind of model which also gave meaning to and structured the world around man in all its manifestations. The elements of the Cosmos and the system of their interrelations was in a certain sense like a structural grid, its subdivisions being used for classifying the varied aspects of the Universe, and all these aspects, all cultural and natural phenomena, proved to be different codes reproducing the same structural configurations as in the cosmic model, hence the correlated elements of these codes form semantic series of synonymous signs.

We already came across such a phenomenon when we studied the Scythian narrative myths: the tripartite structure of Scythian society, the system of the caste groups, the ternary structure of the political organization of Scythia, and the institution of the three kings are interpreted in these myths as deriving from the ternary structure of the Cosmos, being correlated with it. The intrinsic regularities in the functioning of mythological thinking, discovered by modern research, lead to the assumption that other



cultural codes which existed in the Scythian environment followed the same model and were used to reproduce the same structural configurations and the same model of the world. From this point of view, it is necessary to examine one of the most brilliant manifestations of Scythian culture: the art of the animal style.

At the very beginning it is necessary to make the term clear. The concept of "animal style", which has long become established in specialized literature in connection with the art of the peoples from the Eurasian steppes during the Scythian period, has the disadvantage of suggesting a cultural phenomenon whose specificity is manifested above all in the sphere of form, i.e. in style – in the real meaning of this term. The stylistic manifestations of Scythian animalist art are indeed very original, but the topic of this book compels us to leave aside this aspect of its characterization and to examine the monuments of that art as an ideological, and not so much as a stylistic phenomenon. In that case, we should be interested in exactly those specificities in the mythological thinking of the Scythians, which led to the situation of invariable predominance of zoomorphic images in the repertory of decorative motifs in the pictorial art of this people, whereby even during certain periods in the history of the concrete ethnic community the repertory practically consisted of these motifs only. This has led some scholars to the conclusion that the Scythians typically had some specific zoomorphic world outlook, but so far no definite explanation has been given either of the roots of that phenomenon, or of its nature. For many decades Scythian animal style has been subjected to academic analysis, being moreover studied from various perspectives: as aesthetic appreciation and with a view to clarifying the semantic value of its images. However, if the artistic merits of Scythian animalist art are in-

disputable for all scholars, there is incomparably more debate than consensus concerning anything that is related to its semantic charge and to the very reasons for the total predominance of zoomorphic motifs in the pictorial art of Scythia. Sometimes the same facts are given essentially different interpretations, occasionally these interpretations are mutually exclusive. The main opinions on this issues are presented briefly below.

The most frequent hypothesis is that magic underlies the art of the animal style: the images of the animals decorating the warrior's attire and his horse were called upon to guarantee to their owner the qualities which these animals have: strength, dexterity, vigilance, etc. Another opinion is that this art reflects a totemic system of notions: each animal is treated as a totem-ancestor of a concrete Scythian clan or tribe, its image being the emblem or symbol of that tribe; the battle scenes between the animals are interpreted in this hypothesis as a reflection of military clashes between these tribes. According to another view, totemism only gave the initial impetus for the emergence of the art of the animal style and the system of notions behind it, but at the beginning of the Scythian period it no longer determined the character of the people living in the Eurasian steppes at all; according to the supporters of this hypothesis, the animals which originally performed the role of totems for the tribe, became transformed at that time into intertribal deities and formed a peculiar "zoomorphic pantheon" of the Scythians. There is another view, according to which the zoomorphic images in Scythian art were born from the notions about the diversity in the incarnations of each deity, intrinsic to all ancient Iranian cultures, whereas the scenes of the battle between these animals reflected the concept of dualism: the constant struggle between good and evil in the world, which defines the entire appearance of the Uni-



verse and the processes taking place in it, similar to the interpretation of the struggle between Ahumamazda and Angromanyu in the theology of Zoroastrianism.

The launching of these hypotheses was paralleled in the specialized literature by an analysis of their vulnerable points. For example, it was pointed out that totemism as a dominating system of notions was typical of a much more primitive stage of social development than that of the Scythians at the time of interest to us. The hypothesis that the battle scenes between the animals reflect the confrontation between the totems and the tribes incarnated by them, is unable to explain why throughout the entire space of the Eurasian steppes some tribes were always cast in the role of victors, while others were perpetually defeated. The hypothesis which interprets these scenes in the spirit of the Zoroastrian moral dualism leaves open the question why evil always dominates in the art of the Scythians. The reference to the typical notion in ancient Iranian mythology about the infinite variety of divine incarnations does not explain why Scythian art concentrated for a long period of time on presenting only their zoomorphic incarnations, and the conclusion that the Scythians worshipped exclusively the "zoomorphic pantheon" obviously runs counter to the content of the Scythian myths preserved in the works of the ancient authors, where all principal characters are – as we are convinced already – anthropomorphic.

In principle, each of the above hypotheses outlines a *theoretically* feasible situation. A common weak point is that they all start with the premise based on considerations about the possible reasons for the widespread popularity of the zoomorphic images in the culture of an ethnic community; however, either no concrete data on the character of the spiritual life of the Scythians and on the content of their mythology are taken into

account, or they are used to illustrate some preconceived theory. Incidentally, they should serve as the starting premise in the interpretation of the monuments of Scythian animal style. Indeed, if such an interpretation is likened to the deciphering of some unfamiliar script, it can be said that the comparison of the entire range of monuments of Scythian animal art with the systematized and ordered evidence about the Scythian mythological picture of the world, gives us a kind of "bilingue", i.e. two different "texts" having identical content. Knowing the meaning of the parallel text – the reconstructed Scythian narrative mythology and the notion about the structure of the Universe incarnated in it – and having analysed the intrinsic regularities in the structure of works of art featuring the animal style, we can come very close to the best argued "reading" of these works. Let us examine some of the aspects of this interpretation.

Researchers have found a long time ago that too many monuments of Scythian animal art, known today, generally feature a rather restricted repertory of motifs. These are above all hoofed animals: mostly stags, but also mountain goats. Most frequent among the animals are the birds, especially birds of prey, and finally predators – mainly belonging to the feline family. The very fact of the predominance of three types of images already suggests a comparison with the ternary nature of the Scythian model of the world. Such a comparison becomes even more justified, bearing in mind that the study of different mythological traditions has led specialists to the conclusion about the global propagation of the zoomorphic symbols of the three cosmic zones. As a rule, the upper, celestial world is associated with the image of a bird of prey, the middle zone or the human world – with ungulate animals, the lower or chthonic world – with snakes or fishes. Such a symbolism is very well visualized in the Eddic tradi-



**Fig. 32.** *Head of a bird of prey. Bronze appliqué on a horse's bridle. The "Seven Brothers" barrow group*

**Fig. 33.** *A bird of prey. Bronze appliqué from the Golden Barrow*

**Fig. 34.** *The head of a predator. Bronze appliqué from a horse's bridle. The group of barrows near the village of Zhurovka*

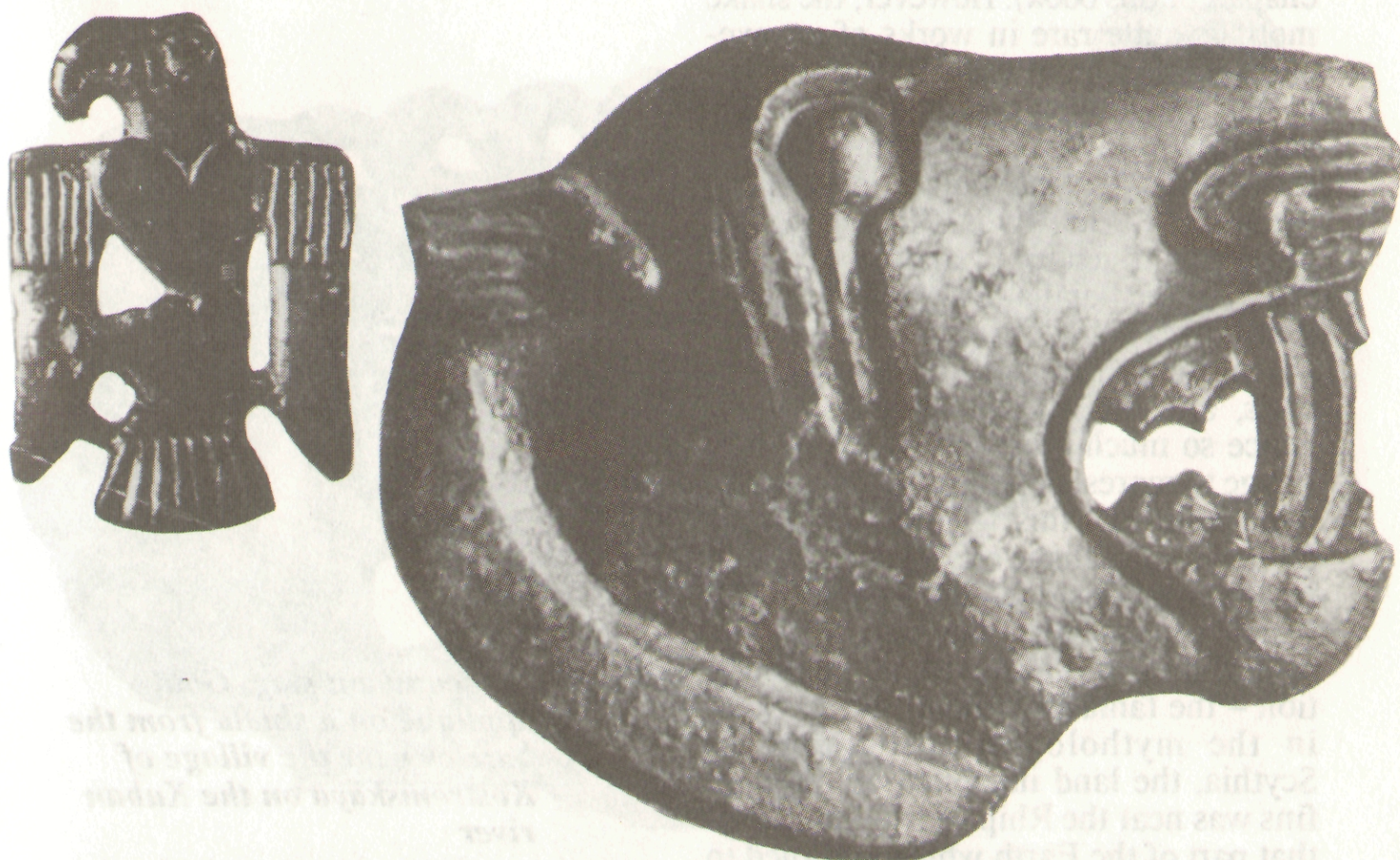


tion of ancient Scandinavia, where the Universe was symbolized by a tree – Yggdrassill's ash-tree, with an eagle living in its crown, a stag standing beside its trunk and nibbling from its branches, and a dragon below its roots. Sometimes the middle zone is associated with four stags, not one, placed on all sides of the tree, so that the image reproduces not only the vertical structure of the Universe, but its horizontal structure as well – in accordance with the already familiar notion about the four sides of the world. The correlation of the three categories of animals with the levels of the Universe is characteristic of many other traditions as well. It explains also the composition of the cited "zoomorphic gifts" which Idanthysos sent to Darius, which in their complexity designate Scythia, the five arrows symbolizing its protection.

The origin of this symbolism of the tripartite Universe is rather transparent.

Birds are correlated with the top, with the sky, due to the character of their existence and the zone which they inhabit. The predominance of the motif of the bird of prey (*Figs 32 and 33*) can most probably be explained with the notion that the upper world was at the same time the world where people went after death, predators being an incarnation of the lethal principle. It is precisely the opposition between the bringing of death and death itself that has attributed hooved animals – which are persecuted by the predators – to the middle (corporal, mortal) world. Snakes are associated with the lower world both because this is the zone where they actually live and because snakes are lethal as well, the chthonic world being also the world of death. The idea about the two worlds in which the deceased persons continued to exist – the upper and the lower world – was rather stable in archaic mythologies over a long period of





time. Only the explanation about why a person went to one world or the other varied. In the earlier periods, man's "itinerary" to the world beyond was determined by his social status, by the degree to which both he and the persons performing the burial rites adhered to the prescribed rituals, and finally by the character of his death. It was only much later, when the idea about the expiation of deeds committed in this world gained popularity, that the notion of man going to either heaven or hell was placed in direct dependence on his conduct while he still lived in this world.

The general meaning of the picture of the world outlined by the examined zoomorphic images consists in the expression of the idea about the constant interaction between life and death. The main characteristic feature of the "middle world" is that it is the world of mortal creatures. They constantly leave it to go to other worlds: to the gods and

to the ancestors, who act not only as the rulers of the world beyond, but give new life as well. Hence the constant turnover of the vital processes, expressed in terms of the language of the zoomorphic images in the system of interrelations of ungulate (herbivorous) animals with the animals bringing death (carnivorous).

It is perfectly obvious that the repertory of images in Scythian animal style is almost identical to the range of zoomorphic symbols of the cosmic zone in the system characterized, being in turn so similar to the cosmology reflected in Scythian myths. A difference is observed in only one element: instead of the triad "bird – ungulate – snake", in Scythia we come across the triad "bird – ungulate – predator" (Fig. 34). Incidentally, Scythian mythology also reflects the links between the netherworld and the image of the snake, which appears in the semi-ophiomorphic rendering of the chthonic goddess (see the second



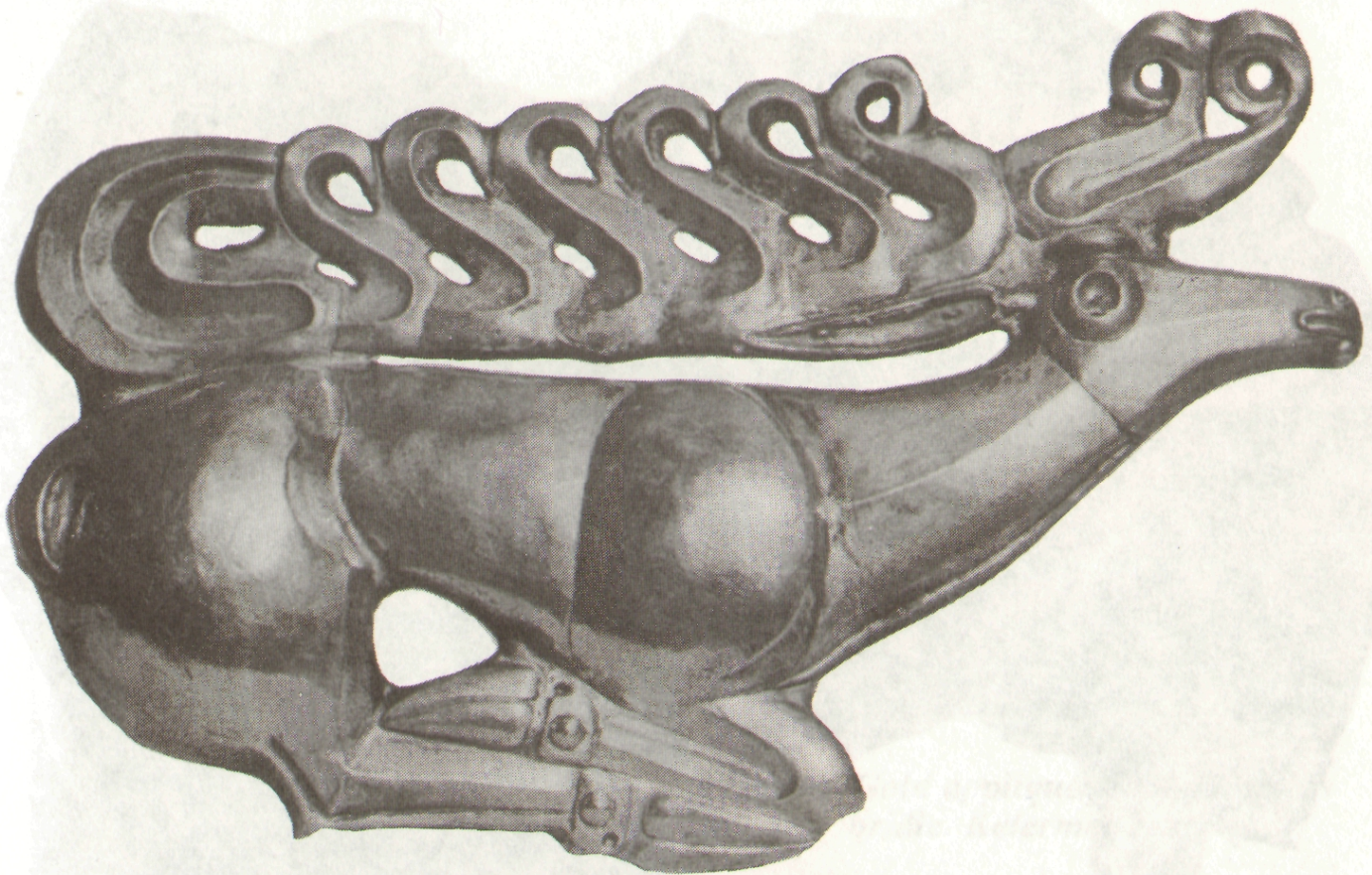
chapter of this book). However, the snake motif is quite rare in works of art executed in the animal style. Its substitution by the image of a predator is perfectly explicable: we are faced again with the incarnation of lethal nature, opposed to the world of the living. This was most probably influenced by another factor as well: for the population of the Northern Pontic area feline predators (practically absent from the region) were exotic animals, alien to man's everyday reality; hence so much more suitable was their image to represent the "other" world in opposition to "this" world. The same fantastic, unrealistic element is observed in the symbolism of the upper world, which is associated not only with the bird of prey, but also with its modification – the fantastic griffin. We saw that in the mythological geography of Scythia, the land inhabited by the griffins was near the Rhipaei Montes, i.e. in that part of the Earth which is turned to the North, and hence "upwards".

Hence the repertory of images in Scythian animal style correlates well with the globally propagated zoomorphic symbolism of the three zones of the Universe, called upon to render the inherent characteristics of each of these zones in the mythological picture of the world. What is the correlation between this semantic value of the concrete content of the works of Scythian art, and what laws governed the creation of these works of art? A specific feature of the animal life, especially of its early monuments, was that they practically lacked any plot, any interaction between the various "characters". In the course of time (and apparently not without the influence of the ancient artistic tradition) plots began to appear in the form of the combat scenes in Scythian art, which will be discussed again later. In the early stages, the only structural principle which interlinked the separate zoomorphic images, was their arranging with respect to one another in the general space of the

*Fig. 35. A recumbent stag. Gold appliqué on a shield from the barrow near the village of Kostromskaya on the Kuban river*

composition. Bearing in mind that these images, as we pointed out, had the purpose of designating the different cosmic zones with stable spatial ordering with respect to one another, such an ordering of the animal images transformed their totality into a kind of pictorial text, based on a "spatial code" and describing the structure of the Universe. The bird motif proved to be fixed to the top of the composition, the hoofed animal – to its middle register, and the predator – to its lower part. But this structure was not absolute. For example, the circumstance that both the upper and the lower worlds were interpreted in Scythian mythology as being the abode of the dead and were designated by some predator, sometimes resulted in their merging in the mythological picture of the world, which in that case acquired a bipartite structure: the world of the living was opposed to the world of the dead in its two manifestations: upper and lower. Such a merging resulted in the appearance of paradoxical pictorial texts, in which the ele-





ment which is semantically related to the cosmic "above" – the bird of prey – is found in the lower part of the composition, i.e. in a position corresponding to the netherworld.

If works executed in the animal style are perceived as peculiar texts which describe through zoomorphic symbols the mythological picture of the world, it appears that a number of their specificities are connected with the semanticism of the images, above all the traditional iconography of each type of animal. The strictly canonical rendering of the postures in which each animal is depicted in Scythian art is one of its most characteristic features. Thus, for example, ungulates appear most frequently with legs bent below their body (so that the hind and the front hooves appear to be one above the other) and with neck craning forward (*Fig. 35*). This posture is sometimes referred to as the posture of "flying gallop", the assumption being that the animal is shown at a moment of a big leap, or while running. However, a

detailed analysis of all phases of the leap of a stag or of a mountain goat, visualized on film, shows that the animal's legs are never drawn so close to the body simultaneously at any moment of this movement. Hence it would be much more logical to interpret such images as representing lying animals. What is more, it has been proved that a similar iconography of ungulates had permeated the art of the Eurasian steppes, having come from the ancient Oriental artistic tradition, where animals in such postures are presented in elaborate multi-figured compositions, e.g. stags or he-goats on either side of the sacred tree. In the ancient Oriental tradition, such a symmetrical composition was probably born from the notion about the tree as an image symbolizing the centre of the world, with the two animal figures next to its trunk as a pattern reduced in accordance with the law analysed earlier, being semantically identical to the four stags standing next to Yggdrassill's ash-tree in the Eddic tradition.





Symmetrical compositions sometimes occur in Scythia as well, above all on objects executed following the ancient Eastern traditions, or even made by ancient Eastern craftsmen on Scythian order. For example, the central element in the composition decorating the hilt of the parade sword from the rich Early Scythian barrow Litoi (Melgunov) Kurgan, which clearly betrays Urartean elements, is the stylized rendering of the sacred tree, goat figures with bent legs being placed on either side of the tree. Special attention should be given to the circumstance that this decoration was chosen for a sword particularly. Earlier we mentioned Herodotus' story about the sword which was thrust into the altar as the symbol of the Scythian Ares. It was also mentioned that such an altar reproduced the model of the *axis mundi*, i.e. it was functionally identical to the world tree. In the composition under consideration, the schematic picture of the tree

is strictly along the central line of the sword itself, thus the object and its decoration prove to be semantically identical.

All this suggests that the posture of the hoofed animal, which was customary to Scythian animal style, correlated well with the symbolism of that animal as a designation of the middle world, i.e. the spatial zone near the trunk of the world tree. In Scythia this motif seems to break away from the multi-figured ancient Eastern composition that gave birth to it, though preserving the original semantics. Such an interpretation finds visual confirmation in the gold disc which was an element in the decoration of horse-trappings found in one of the Kelermes barrows (*Fig. 36*). This disc is divided by perpendicular lines in relief into four identical sectors, each of which contains the figure of a stag in the described posture and with a head facing the middle line. Here it is easy to





*Fig. 36. Gold appliqué from a horse's bridle. Kelermes barrows*

*Fig. 37. A curled up predator. Bone plaqué from Temir-Gora*

read the same semantics which was characteristic of the decorative motif with the four stags around the world tree in the Eddic tradition: the round shape of the appliqué symbolizes space, its centre coincides with the centre of the world, and the figures of the animals are correlated to the cardinal directions of the world.

Apparently, the isolated images of the hoofed animal in the indicated posture (and they predominate in Scythian art) had preserved their original meaning in the composition that gave birth to that iconography, and corresponded to the importance of that image as a sign of the middle cosmic zone.

The iconography of the predator, which was quite common in the art of the Scythians and of the entire region of the Eurasian steppes, is very original: it is often depicted curled in a ball (*Fig. 37*), so that his head is touching its tail, while the legs bent close to the body are

in the circle formed by the animal's body. Some researchers assume that a similar pictorial interpretation resulted from the shape of the objects decorated with such images, i.e. its genesis was purely formal. However, the assumption put forward earlier in the book about the semantics of the predator's image in Scythian art allows us to disagree with such an interpretation and prompts us to attribute a definite semantic charge to that convention. Let us recall that according to that interpretation, the predator's image occupied that place in the zoomorphic symbolism of Scythia, which in other traditions belonged to the snake, i.e. predators were correlated with the netherworld. Incidentally, such a posture is characteristic precisely of the snake, not only in pictorial art, but in the myths of the different peoples as well, moreover being endowed with precisely the same semantic value. For example, in Scandinavian mythology there



is the gigantic world dragon who lives in the ocean that surrounds the entire Earth; the dragon is holding his tail between his teeth, so that his body forms a circle. In other words, that dragon is a creature encircling the inhabitable world and identical to its outer, peripheral contour. Parallel with this, according to the same Scandinavian tradition, the dragon lives in the roots of the world tree. Such a coincidence is not at all accidental. In the previous chapter, when we

analysed the mythological notions about space, we noted that the periphery in the horizontal subsystem of the cosmic model is semantically identical to the lower part in its vertical subsystem, because both correspond to the chthonic world. This is why, in the Eddic tradition these two zones are designated by the same zoomorphic symbol, i.e. the dragon. If in Scythia the predator is associated with the same nether world, the "ring-like" posture is more than appropriate for it,





*Fig. 38. Gold sheath of a sword.  
Melgunov (Litoy) barrow*



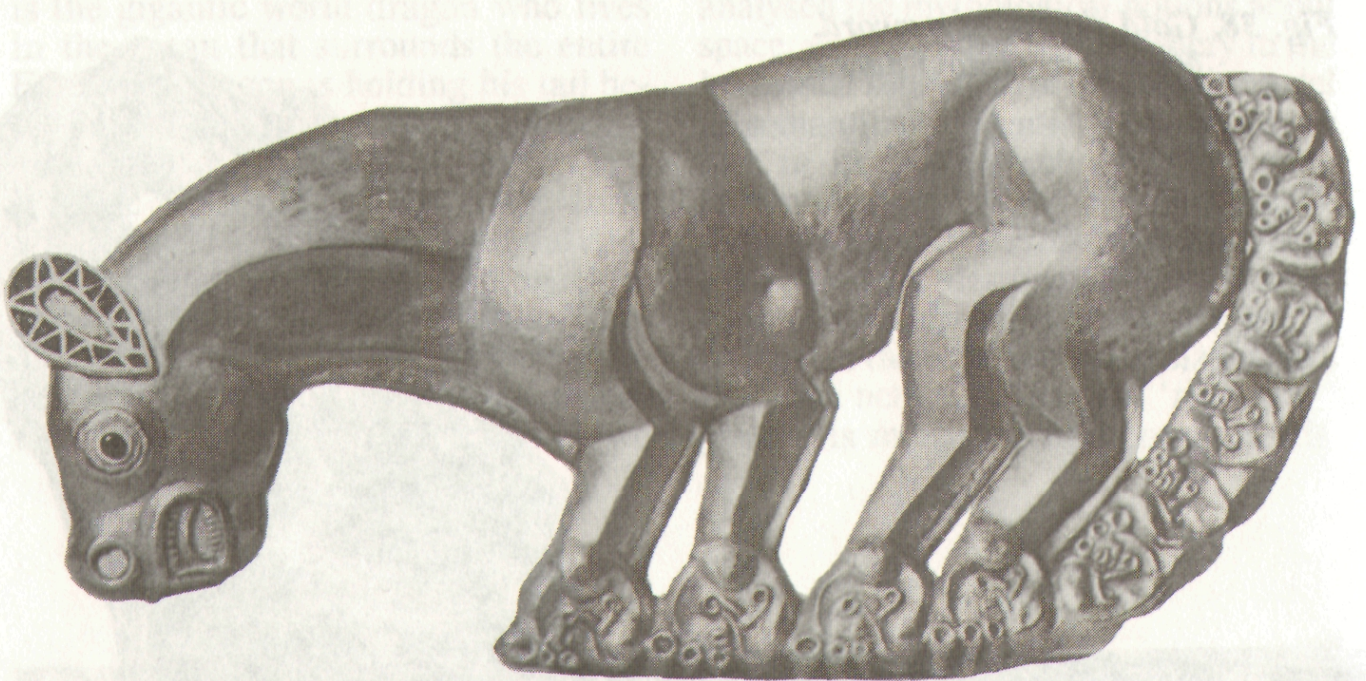
because – similar to the Scandinavian dragon – it also surrounded the inhabitable world and symbolized its peripheral zone.

Such an interpretation of the different zoomorphic images in Scythian animal style can be best confirmed by their positioning in the decorative system of Scythian swords and of their sheaths – the equivalent of the world tree and of the world's axis (*Fig. 38*). As a rule, the stag's figure here is in its broad middle part, "near the trunk" of the tree. The figure of the curled up predator is the usual decorative motif for the lower tip of the sheath. However, the sword itself was often decorated with the heads of birds of prey. Thus, the positioning of the three zoomorphic motifs – bird, ungulate and predator – along the sword's axis corresponded precisely to the posi-

tioning of the three zones of the Universe represented by these animals with respect to one another; the postures of the animals also correspond to that semantic interpretation. A similar positioning of the two motifs – stag and predator – is found in the decoration of some Scythian bronze mirrors having a long handle: the stag's figurine is placed at the juncture of the handle to the disc, the predator's figure being in the lower part of the handle. Here the zoomorphic symbols mark only the two zones of the Universe: the middle and the nether world. In all probability, the upper, celestial world was probably designated in this case by the actual disc of the mirror, interpreted as the Sun.

A curious variant of the spatial distribution of the individual zoomorphic motifs in the composition as a means of





expressing their semantics is the placing of these motifs on the body of a larger animal, more specifically the shaping of some parts of its body as additional zoomorphic motifs. In Scythian studies this approach is known as zoomorphic metamorphoses. Thus, the stag's antlers can be interpreted as the heads of birds, the additional small figures are sometimes placed on the animal's shoulder, hip, hind part or even on its tail. This approach is most probably based on the so-called corporal or anatomical code. The use of separate parts or even of whole zones of the human or animal body as symbols of the elements of the Cosmos was extremely widespread in archaic cultures, whereby the correlation of the elements of the anatomical and of the cosmic codes was practically universal even for perfectly unrelated cultural traditions. For example, the head is usually interpreted as a sign of the cosmic "above", of the sky. The lower, chthonic world is designated by the lower (or posterior) part of the body, whereas the middle part of the body stands for the middle cosmic zone. Such a cosmological interpretation of the human body is best illustrated by the popular Old-Indic myth about Puruṣa (*Rigveda*, X, 90): the giant from various parts of whose body the gods created the

various elements of the world in the course of a grandiose sacrifice, the different social groups, the Varnas, etc. Another Indic Ritual text – *Bṛihadarniaka Upanishada* (I, 1) – reflects the correlation of the parts of the body of the sacrificial horse with the different zones of the Cosmos.

It is obvious that such an enormous cosmic body should be the interpretation of the animal images in the works of Scythian animal style, with additional motifs – zoomorphic metamorphoses – being placed on them. This reveals a kind of synonymy (semantic identity) between the member of the cosmic body which is decorated with the additional image and the actual decorative motif. For example, the tail and the ends of the paws of the famous panther from Kelermes – a gold appliqué on a shield – are treated as miniature images of the same predators, but curled up in a ball (*Fig. 39*). Here the same idea of the cosmic "below" is expressed in three parallel ways: through the choice of an animal whose image is used as a zoomorphic metamorphosis, through the posture of that animal, and finally through the parts of the body from the figure: background (posterior part = below), decorated with





*Fig. 39. "Panther". Gold appliqué to a shield. Kelermes barrows*

*Fig. 40. A curled up predator. Kulakovskiy's barrow*

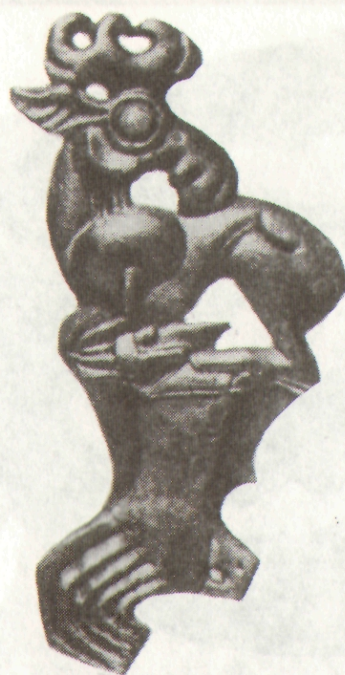
these metamorphoses. Several Scythian barrows have yielded large bronze appliques, their figures resembling a wolf curled in a ball (Fig. 40). The shoulder blade of this beast (the middle cosmic zone) is additionally decorated with the picture of a goat's figure and with an elk's head, i.e. hoofed animals symbolizing the same zone, while the ends of the paws are shaped to resemble the heads of birds of prey, i.e. an example of the paradoxical merging between the upper and the lower world of the dead. Actually, this is an example of the parallel use of different codes for expressing the same structure.

Such a parallelism is generally rather characteristic of the mythological texts, even of narrative ones: for example, the hero's name corresponds semantically to his origin, to his nature, to the meaning of the deeds performed by him, to the entire plot of the myth, etc. C. Lévi-Strauss defines this peculiarity as "laminar structure of the myth". At first glance, it creates a certain redundancy of the information invested in the mythological text. In fact, the use of this approach – and this is particularly apparent in our case with the zoomorphic works of art – has resulted in a peculiar "polyfunctionality" of each mythologi-

cal text, and a simultaneous correlation with the different aspects of the Universe. This also shows the universal character of the structures reproduced, the text itself being transformed into a reproduction of the model of the world in the entire range of its manifestations.

The anatomical code analysed apparently underlies yet another technique which was typical of the Scythian animal style, namely to depict not the animal's entire body, but only a part of it, moreover usually choosing precisely that part which is semantically identical to the animal's image. For example, if the predator's hind legs are depicted, this is a double expression of the idea of the lower cosmic world, the heads of the birds of prey being a double incarnation of the upper zone of the Cosmos. Incidentally, this explanation is not by far relevant to all types of individual depicting of the animal's head, which are characteristic of every zoomorphic image represented in the repertory of the animal style. This may be explained with the circumstance that the head has long been interpreted as the centre of the essence, as a full-blooded equivalent of the entire creature. This was manifested in different spheres of culture, e.g. in sacrifices, where the head symbolizes the entire animal which





*Fig. 41. An elk figure on the talons of a bird of prey. Bronze appliqué from horse-trappings. Barrow group near the village of Zhurovka*

is being sacrificed.

A curious example of the merging of the zoological and anatomical codes can be seen in the composition on the appliqué of horse-trappings, found in the forest-steppe course of the Dniepr river: a small figure of an elk in the typical posture for ungulates – with legs bent under the body – appears on something like a pedestal, formed by the rendering of the claws of a bird of prey (*Fig. 41*). This is a visualization of the binary interpretation of the structure of the Universe: the world of the living is opposed to the world of the dead, the first being designated by the entire figure of the animal correlated with it, the second – with an individual part (particularly lethal) of the zoomorphic image symbolizing it.

In spite of the canonical nature of Scythian animal style, the concrete solutions of the ideas contained in it are rather varied, and by far not all of the numerous monuments known to us can be absolutely decoded. For example, we are still unable to explain what determined the choice of the hoofed animal – stag, elk or he-goat – in each concrete case. The nature of the composition of such pictorial texts is not always clear. However, as a whole, we can state with certainty that these works of art demonstrated the existence of something like a zoological

code in Scythian culture, as one of the means of describing the Universe. A similar symbolism of zoomorphic images was extremely widespread in archaic cultures. One cannot rule out the possibility its roots to be traced back to the concepts of totemism, but such totemic zoological classifications outlived by a long time totemism as a comprehensive world outlook system.

However, the use of the zoological code to describe the Universe, which was essentially a global phenomenon during the antiquity, cannot explain by itself the determining role which the animal style acquired in the life of the Scythians. The specificity of Scythia consists in the fact that the language of the zoomorphic images, based on the zoological code, actually became the only sign system on which its pictorial art was formed. In order to clarify the roots of this phenomenon and to bring its explanation in line with everything that is known about Scythian mythology, it will be necessary to analyse comprehensively all works of pictorial art known to us, which existed in the Scythian environment, in all their diversity, with a view to identifying the place of works in the animal style among them. An attempt to cope with this task will be made in the next chapter.



# Mythology of the Scythians in Visible Images

In the chapters of the book devoted to the reconstruction of the Scythian mythological narrative, we periodically turned to monuments of the visual arts, in addition to the evidence in the works of the ancient authors, which serve as the main source for its reconstruction. However, these are essentially scenes predominantly, and their content is directly associated with the fragments of Scythian myths preserved in the Graeco-Roman literature. Images of a different nature have been adduced only to an insignificant degree in the course of the presentation of the material. Incidentally, the study of Scythian mythology requires to devote attention to all known Scythian pictorial monuments, because they can add substantially to our knowledge about Scythia. Moreover, it is these materials that are actually the only source reflecting the historical being of Scythian mythology in dynamics and allowing to trace the role it played in the life of Scythia during the different stages of its history lasting four centuries. In fact, it is not possible to perceive this dynamics when analysing the ancient texts, because they often reproduce not the living contemporary tradition, but rather repeat evidence that is isolated from its historical context, having been borrowed from considerably earlier sources. Consequently, the task of this chapter will be the comprehensive analysis of works of art which originate from the Scythian complexes and whose content is related to Scythian mythology.

Many specificities in the history of the existence of monuments of this type in Scythia have been predetermined by that specific cultural phenomenon, which was briefly referred to in the introductory part of the book: by the original aniconism of the oldest Indo-Iranian culture. Researchers have for a long time focused their attention on the absence of pictorial works of art in the culture of tribes living over most of the



Eurasian steppe belt in the Late Bronze Age, and claiming – with the highest degree of plausibility, according to modern research – the right to play the role of Proto-Indo-Iranians. Very fruitful archaeological excavations over that area for many years testify perfectly convincingly that the culture of these peoples was equally not characterized by images of either people, or animals, or any real objects for that matter. Indeed, in rare cases researchers have found there isolated sketches with such a content on the wall of a clay vessel or on some stone slab, but the actual level of execution only confirms the view about the basically aniconic character of the culture of these tribes, because it proves that they completely lacked any habits or traditions in the sphere of pictorial art. Specialists have noted justifiably that this does not mean in the least that these peoples were not creative, because their inherent creative potential could have had manifestations in other spheres: in oral speech, in music, in dancing, etc. Each concrete culture had different degrees of realization in the various spheres.

The reported data correlate well with all available evidence about the early cultural history of the different peoples belonging to the Indo-Iranian group. Judging by everything, the Indo-Aryans, who went to Northern India towards the end of the 2nd millennium BC, did not bring with them any traditions in the sphere of pictorial art, but their language became the basis on which the languages in the region surviving to this day were formed, whereas the elements of their folkloric heritage are still alive in the creativity of Indian narrators of folklore, largely shaping the entire outlook of Indian culture. The tribes speaking the Iranian language, which moved around the beginning of the 1st millennium BC to the territory of present-day Iran and to the adjacent area, accepted all habits in the sphere of the

visual arts from the indigenous population in these territories, or from the neighbouring ethnic communities, while their contribution to the language, mythology and religion played a formative role.

The Scythians – that branch of the Indo-Iranian ethnic massif, which remained within the confines of their original homeland – were similarly unfamiliar with the visual arts in the dawn of their history. During the so-called Cimmerian period, the objects belonging to the material culture of the Northern Pontic population were decorated only with monotonous geometric ornamental motifs. They most probably coded definite notions about the structure of the world as well, but the key to this code has not been found yet.

The changes in that sphere occurred during the second half of the 7th century BC and were most probably connected with two events of Scythian history. First, the foundations of the socio-political structure that was to be characteristic of the Scythian kingdom during the subsequent centuries were laid precisely at that time as a result of different Pontic tribes being subordinated to the Royal Scythians (Scythians proper, Skolotoi – see the Introduction). The traditional Indo-Iranian social organization with its centuries-old history was replaced by a new and more pronounced hierarchy and social organization of the different parts of society; during that period, the Scythians found themselves on the threshold of class society. Second, the Scythian tribal union undertook an incursion into Western Asia, which also contributed to essential changes in the level of its social development, and accelerated the formation of a hierarchically organized society. Naturally, the qualitatively new relations were interpreted in terms of the categories of the mythological model of the world that had long been inherent to the ancestors of the Scythians, but with an essentially different distribution



*Fig. 42. Guardian deities near the sacred tree. A detail from the decoration of a sheath found in Melgunov's barrow*



of the accents, hence the changes taking place in that sphere required new ways of visualizing the traditional system, new sign systems, capable of reproducing the system of values that was taking shape. The old ornamental art was incapable of coping with that task. Incidentally, the peoples of the Middle East, with which the Scythians had close contacts at that time, had long been in the possession of rich traditions in the artistic rendering of mythological images. It was precisely from that arsenal that the Scythians borrowed some motifs and laid the foundations of their own art, and in the first place of the animal style.

The process of the formation of Scythian animalist art on an ancient Eastern basis has been analysed in detail by many Russian scholars: M.I. Artamonov, M.I. Vyazmitina, V.G. Lukonin, B.B. Pyotrovskiy, and others, who found a substantial Eastern element in Early Scythian monuments of the type of the Kelermes or Melgunov barrows. However, they did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that initially the Scythians borrowed not only animal images, but anthropomorphic motifs as well, from the foreign cultural pictorial repertory. Consequently, the content of Early Scythian art correlates poorly with the theory about the specific zoomorphic world outlook of these people and about the exclusively "animal pantheon" which

they worshipped. It seems more likely that the ornamentation of the objects found here, consisting of zoo- and anthropomorphic motifs, was intertwined with the already reached conclusions about the character of Scythian mythology.

The Scythians borrowed the motifs for their emerging art from Urartu, from Assyria and from the Greek settlers in Asia Minor. Moreover, they did not accept them mechanically at all. From the entire wealth of images inherent to these cultures, they selected naturally only those that could be interpreted more or less successfully as the incarnation of genuinely Scythian mythological images. For example, the scabbards from the Melgunov and from the Kelermes barrows (*Fig. 42*), as well as the sword from Kelermes, are decorated with a composition that is typical of Assyrian-Urartean art: two winged cherubs on either side of the sacred tree. This is one of the variants of the symmetrical composition analysed earlier, incarnating the notion about the centric organization of space and about the deities guarding the four directions of the world. It is not accidental that this motif was used in Scythia to decorate a sword, i.e. one of the equivalents of the world's axis. In this way, the decoration on the object doubled the mythological idea, expressed in the ritual function of the object itself.



What is more, the artist who made this ornamentation following Scythian orders, modified somewhat the traditional ancient Eastern configuration, by placing two additional images of trees on both sides of the central element, thus creating an adequate rendering of the notion typical of the Indo-Iranians about the organization of space and about the trees which are correlated with each cardinal direction; let us recall the poles decorated with standards in the Scythian ritual.

Another anthropomorphic image which attracts our attention is the image of a centaur carrying on his shoulder a whole tree with a killed stag tied to it, on the silver rhyton from Kelermes. To this day, the ability to carry such a big load is considered in Ossetic folklore as a sign of the hero's great strength. Could this be one of the cases in which the Ossetic tradition has preserved some mythical-epic motif that can be traced back to the Scythian period?

In the third chapter we mentioned the human figure holding an axe in his hand, decorating the gold axe from the same Kelermes barrow, which we interpreted as the image of the progenitor of the Scythian kings Kolaxais. B.B.Pyotrovskiy drew attention to the fact that the image was based on a traditional image in ancient Eastern art – that of a cherub near the sacred tree; however, there are certain changes: the wings have disappeared, and instead of the usual sacred attribute, the man is holding a battle-axe – a much more appropriate object for a Scythian hero.

The silver mirror found in the Kelermes barrow has a much more intricate decoration (*Fig. 43*). Its surface is divided into eight equal sectors, each containing various figures following the traditions of Early Ionic art. Anthropomorphic images alternate here with images of animals which are very close to works of art in the Early Scythian animal style. According to the observations

*Fig. 43. The silver mirror from Kelermes*

of specialists, although the mirror was made by an Ionic and not by a Scythian craftsman, it should be considered as a Scythian monument both in form and in terms of the ideology which it reflects. Unfortunately, we cannot decipher fully the meaning attributed in the Scythian environment to the images decorating the Kelermes mirror. The decoration of this object most probably reflected Scythian calendar and spatial-geographic notions; similar themes are exclusively characteristic of the motifs which decorated the ancient mirrors.

Some specificities of the arrange-





ment of the decorative motifs on the mirror from Kelermes seem to confirm such an assumption. For example, one of the sectors contains a scene in which two nude male figures with hairy bodies are fighting against a griffin. The motif reflecting the struggle of semi-fantastic human beings with griffins is already known to us in Scythian mythology: this is the story of the Arimaspoi who lived far in the North. Then, this sector in the decorative pattern of the mirror should be correlated with the North and with that season when the Sun moves to the North, i.e. with the summer. The dia-

metrically opposite sector features the image of the winged goddess holding two lions by the front paws; this is the so-called Potnia Theron – a deity whose image was very popular in the ancient Eastern and Ionic iconography. If the first motif has been correctly correlated with the North, then this goddess should be perceived as a symbol of the South, which in the Scythian picture of the world is correlated in turn with the cosmic “below”. The image of the predator – accompanying the goddess in the composition in question – is also connected with that zone of the Cosmos in Scyth-



ian zoomorphic symbolism. Could this be the first attempt to render the Scythian chthonic goddess with the means of expression of the visual arts – the same goddess who was later depicted as a snake-like creature? (Incidentally, the iconography of that creature also reveals features that can be traced back to the image of the Potnia Theron – let us recall the snake-legged goddess holding the horns of the monstrous dragons from the horse's head-piece from the Bolshaya Tsymbalka barrow, cited earlier.) In that case it would be logical to attribute this sector in calendar terms to winter, when the Sun goes to the nether world.

In those sectors of the Kelermes mirror, which are strictly localized between the two sectors considered, the same motif recurs: a pair of winged sphinxes with female protomés and leonine bodies. These groups are distinguished by a strictly symmetrical-heraldic composition: in one of the sectors the sphinxes are standing face to face, in another they are sitting on their hind paws. If the hypothesis about the correlation of the two motifs considered above with the North – “above” – summer and South – “below” – winter is plausible, then the symmetry of the latter two groups and the recurrence of the same images in them suggests a link between the decoration of these sectors with the moments of equinox: in spring and in autumn. In this way it appears that the symbols of the four turning points in the solar calendar are oriented along the two perpendicular axes of the Kelermes mirror. In order to confirm such an interpretation, it would be necessary to explain whether there is some connection between the zoomorphic images in the four intermediary sectors and the astral symbolism of the four seasons, which existed in the ancient East and in the Ionic environment. Such a scrupulous work promises very interesting results and it awaits its author.

On the whole, the considered Early

Scythian monuments are indisputable evidence that at the time when the Scythians felt the need to express their mythological concepts in terms of pictorial art, this was done with images borrowed from the repertory of the Eastern (Ionic included) art, being even subjected to partial processing. However, these images, which came originally from an alien culture, survived for a relatively brief period of time in a Scythian environment, i.e. apparently only as long as the Scythians had preserved their direct contacts with the ancient Eastern cultural environment, or while the craftsmen brought to Scythia after the campaigns into Western Asia lived. Anthropomorphic motifs disappeared from Scythian art not later than the middle of the 6th century BC.

This was most probably due to the incomplete adequacy of the borrowed images of the notions existing in the Scythian environment about the figures which these images were called upon to incarnate. Having been formed within a different mythological tradition, with its own inherent notions – not at all identical to the Scythian ones – about the appearance and the attributes of the heroes in the mythology and about the stories connected with them, these images could not be adapted to express the qualitatively new content without substantial processing. During the contacts between Scythia and the ancient East that processing could not be completed, moreover it was greatly hampered by the rigid canonic rules of artistic rendering, typical of ancient Oriental art. Scythian artists, who had no skills whatsoever in the visual arts, were incapable of achieving the necessary processing of the borrowed images and of the iconographic patterns. Hence, ancient Eastern and Ionic images of deities and other anthropomorphic images could not strike root in Scythian art.

The fate of the zoomorphic images accepted by the Scythians was quite dif-



ferent. They did not have to depict the heroes of Scythian mythology: as we have seen, these heroes were not endowed with a zoomorphic image. They had a different function: they were conditional signs-symbols corresponding to definite elements of the Scythian mythological model of the world, being intended to incarnate the structural configurations characterizing that model. These signs acquired a zoomorphic character most probably because – as in the absolute majority of archaic cultures – the zoomorphic code had always existed in the Proto-Scythian environment as a means of symbolic description of the world; indirect evidence of this is discovered also in the surviving fragments of Scythian folklore. However, until that moment it lacked imagerial expression, its earlier use had not resulted in the emergence of animalist art. Then the alien images borrowed by the Scythians could guarantee the formation of the respective sign system, whereby they did not require a radical processing, due to the conditional character of such signs. Such borrowing was also facilitated by the absence of an active story element in Scythian animalist compositions. The different animal images were more susceptible to reinterpretation in the spirit of the genuine Scythian concepts; besides, the structural configurations which these images had to express, referred in their vast majority to the class of mythological universalia, being identical in the different cultures. All this eventually resulted in the formation on the basis of borrowings of the specific art of the animal style as a predominant mode in Scythia for expressing the mythological picture of the world through the language of pictorial art. Its repertory grew gradually with time, the iconographic patterns became richer through the use of zoomorphic metamorphoses, as well as some other novelties of plot and style. In this way, it was precisely the animal style which for several centuries became

not only the most original element of Scythian culture, but also essentially the only trend in pictorial art, represented in it. The semantic aspect of the works of art were already discussed in the previous chapter.

Only one group of human images in Scythian art outlived this boundary and continued to exist parallel to the works of art featuring the animal style during the next centuries. These were the stone statues of warriors (*Fig. 44*), which were placed over the burial mounds of noble Scythians, most probably chieftains of different ranks. These statues differed essentially in appearance: sometimes they were very meticulously executed statues of warriors, coming close to the idea of sculpture in the full sense of the word, on other occasions they were simply stone pillars or slabs on which the parts of the body and elements of the apparel of the depicted persons were rendered very schematically. Nevertheless, if one approaches these statues from the perspective of the mode of reflecting the environment which they incarnated, they could be examined as a homogeneous series of human images, so far unknown in other works of Scythian art. What could be the explanation of this situation?

Most probably, these statues had an essentially different way of coding the mythological information, compared with the images just analysed. The person represented by the statue was not incorporated in any scene or composition of another nature: it is autonomous, representing to a certain extent not an isolated element of the text, but an independent entire text. Such an assumption is also confirmed by the history of the formation of this category of monuments. The origin of the Scythian stone statues is not traced to works of ancient Eastern art. Apparently, their immediate precursor should be sought in the primitive Pontic stelae from pre-Scythian times: stone pillars placed in vertical position over the tumuli. In fact, these stelae were









not yet monuments of the visual arts in the proper sense of the term, though without depicting a human being or an anthropomorphic creature, they at the same time designated a human figure. This was achieved by introducing images of some elements of a warrior's attire at the respective places on the stone pillar: a necklace-bracelet in the upper part and a belt in the lower part of the pillar. In the normal place for the belt, there sometimes appeared very schematic pictures of the attributes attached to it: whetstone, gorytos with a bow and battle-axe. Such conditional techniques not only transformed the stone pillar into a sign of a human figure, but they also divided it into three parts, which corresponded to the three zones of the world in the terms of the anatomical code considered earlier. The part of the pillar above the necklace designated the head and corresponded to the upper, celestial world, the register below the belt was correlated to the chthonic, nether world, whereas the middle part between the necklace and the belt served to mark the middle world. It is precisely such primitive stelae, formed already within the frameworks of the strictly aniconic (non-pictorial) culture, that expressed most laconically the cosmological essence of such monuments, using the means of expression of the anatomical code. The monuments were quite widespread in the Eurasian steppes. In the eastern part of the region – in Southern Siberia and in Central Asia – these stelae acquired the rather peculiar appearance of the so-called "stag stones"; in addition to the elements of the individual's attire, intended to divide the stone pillar into parts that correspond to the zones of the human body and to the cosmic levels correlated with them, stag images were introduced on the pillar (usually in its middle part), and in this way the idea invested in the monument was expressed in terms of both the anatomical

*Fig. 44. Scythian stone statues*



and the zoological code. On the whole, such pillars acted as a material incarnation of the cosmic structure.

The described stone stelae became the basis for the formation of Scythian anthropomorphic statues. Moreover, the evolution was entirely at the expense of the growing complexity of the plan of the expression. For example, a more or less detailed rendering of a face appeared in the upper part, sometimes also a hairstyle or a hat; in the middle part greater attention began to be attached to details of the clothing and to the realistic execution of the attributes, hands also appeared; and finally, legs and feet began to be depicted in individual cases in the lower part of the statue, male genitalia being more frequent. The pillar-like stela was transformed into an anthropomorphic image. However, the actual structure of the monument and the idea invested in it remained the same. The necklace and the belt dividing the figure into zones with a definite significance remained the most frequent, almost mandatory attributes of the statue; in the rare cases when they were not depicted, the respective division was achieved with different – already purely sculptural – techniques, e.g. the head was distinguished by shaping the shoulders and the neck.

If Scythian statues, which were dated as a whole to a relatively long period of time (6th-3rd century BC) and today number several dozens, are distributed according to their chronological sequence, we would not obtain a clear picture of the gradually increasing sophistication of their artistic form, of the intensification of the naturalist element and of the greater use of sculptural technique. After the qualitative leap at some period in the 6th century BC, which transformed the schematic stela into a statue, two groups of human images existed in parallel in Scythia: realistic and too schematic, using a minimum of means for the anthropomorphization of

the stone pillar and for expressing the original idea. This circumstance was the best evidence that precisely that idea had remained a key element in the semantics of the forms, determining their persistence in the Scythian environment. But what was the ritual function of these statues and the mythological semantics of the image incarnated by them?

It has been mentioned already that similar statues were erected in Scythia over the graves of chieftains having different ranks. According to the different sources of information, mythological thinking perceived such a chieftain as the personification of the community led by him, as its personal incarnation. The health, the physical strength and the actual life of the chieftain were a guarantee for the well-being of the community, each damage inflicted to the chieftain affected that well-being, whereas the extreme manifestation of that damage – the chieftain's death – was equivalent to the disintegration of social (and hence of cosmic) order, to the temporary triumph of chaos over the Cosmos, which required its immediate elimination. Since mythological thinking identified cosmic order with the image symbolizing it – the world tree, the cosmic pillar, etc. – the violation of that order, even that caused by the death of the chieftain, was interpreted as the collapse of that pillar and the inflicted damage could be rectified only by erecting it anew. Hence the placing of an anthropomorphic statue, expressing in terms of the anatomical code the structure of the ordered Cosmos, which is emphasized by its tripartite nature as well, became an invariable element of the rite related to the burial of that chieftain. In that context, such a statue played the role of a substitute of the deceased and of his image accordingly. The chieftain himself (the king – perceived on the scale of the entire Scythia) in his turn personified the first Scythian king from mythical times and therefore the stone statue was perceived



simultaneously as depicting that mythological figure as well. As we have seen, the first king in the Scythian myths was Kolaxais, or his father Targitaos – the progenitor of the Scythians and the personification of the human world. In order to decide which of these two men was depicted by the Scythian statues, let us turn our attention to two of their characteristic features: their marked tripartite character and the frequent rendering of male attributes. The later detail correlated directly with the role of progenitor, attributed to Targitaos, while the tripartite nature corresponded to his characterization as the triune incarnation of the three zones of the Universe, each of which was personified in one of his three sons. This suggests then that at the level of narrative mythology Scythian statues could be interpreted as depicting Targitaos.

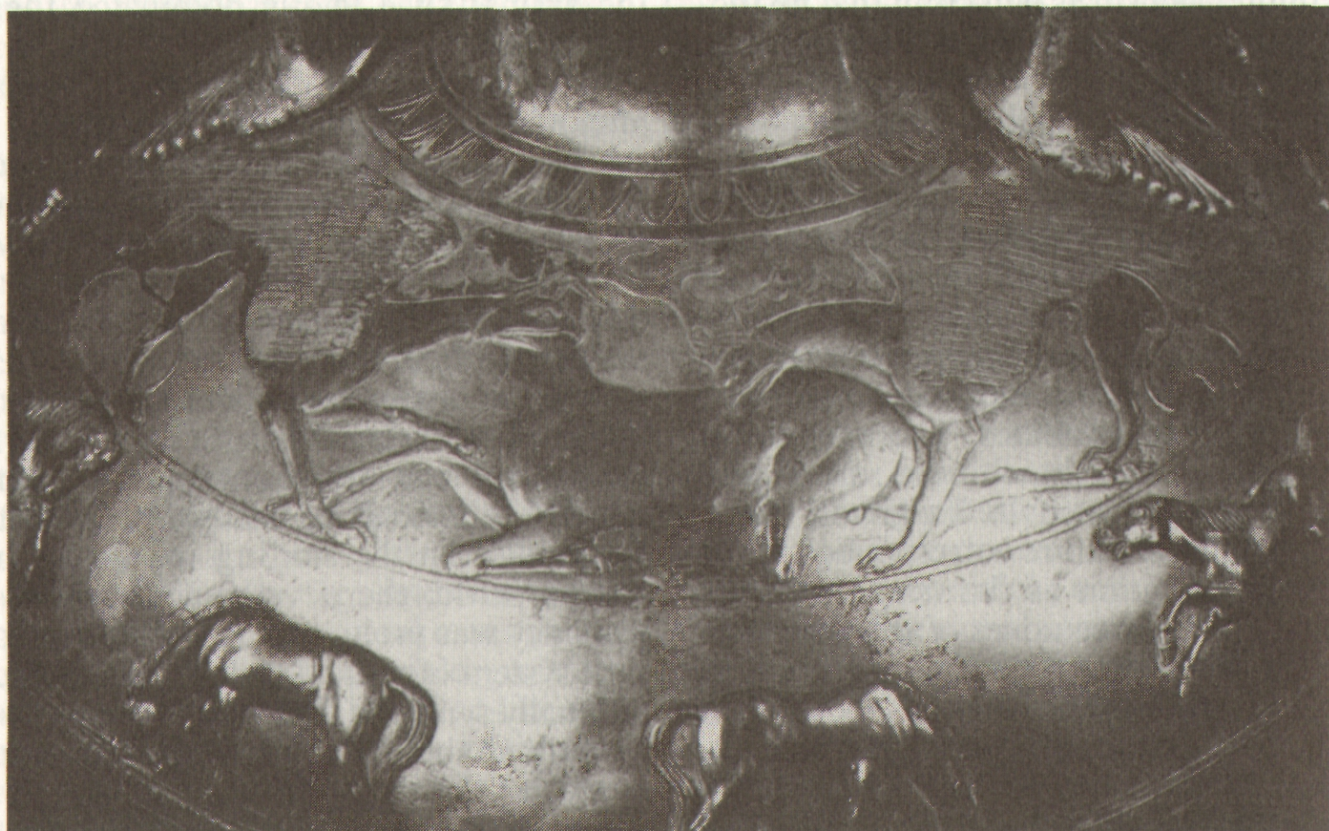
Generally speaking, however, such statues should be perceived as a ritual attribute with a triple semantics: this was at the same time a material incarnation of the symbol of world order, i.e. the cosmic pillar whose erecting was called upon to abolish the temporary violation of that order; the image of the mythological figure personifying that order and hence being semantically identical to the world pillar; and finally, the image of a concrete individual – of the chieftain or king buried in the barrow over which the statue had been erected – which, due to its inherent social function, was perceived as the incarnation both of the social and cosmic order, and of the mythological figure personifying that order. Having been formed independently of the other anthropomorphic images in Scythian art, at first exclusively on the basis of the use of the anatomical code, and having acquired the characteristics of a real work of art only in the course of their evolution, Scythian statues had their own fate that was autonomous of these images and existed there even during the period when

the animal style totally dominated the rest of Scythian art.

As regards the fate of that style, after the process of its formation as a specific sign system ended around the middle of the 6th century BC, its further development markedly demonstrated two tendencies that were somewhat contradictory. Specialists usually characterize the first of these tendencies as a gradual stylization and schematization of the images, leading eventually to their transformation into ornamental motifs in which it is difficult for the unaccustomed eye to discern the starting image. In a certain sense, the development of this tendency was programmed by the actual sign system of animal style, by the conditionally symbolic character of the signs making up that style. For such signs the degree of similarity to the real objects acting as symbols was practically not very great, hence the image gradually turned into a hieroglyph by losing its initially intrinsic figurativeness, but often acquired all kinds of ornamental elements that "adorned" it. From a purely aesthetic point of view, this tendency resulted in a certain degradation of Scythian animal style, loss of its inherent laconism and expressiveness. However, it continued to perform its characteristic semiotic functions and served as a means of describing the model of the world and of reproducing the structural configurations making up that model.

The parallel second tendency, defined as the growing presence of realistic moments in Scythian animalist art, was closely connected to the history of cultural relations between the indigenous population of the Northern Pontic area and the inhabitants of the Greek colonies along the Pontic coast, because it was the direct consequence of the influence of Greek culture on the Scythians. The Greeks, who appeared along the Northern Pontic coasts in the 7th century BC and founded a rather dense network of cities there throughout the





6th century BC, had a keen interest in active trade relations with the Scythians, because they received from them grain, which was essential both for the population of these colonies, and for the Greek metropolis. Scythia supplied the ancient world with other valuable products as well. In their turn, the Scythian aristocracy began to buy the products of the Greek craftsmen, and their virtually unlimited buying power was essential for the economy of the ancient world. In order to become firmly established on that market, Greek artists and craftsmen tried to adapt their production to suit the tastes and the demand of Scythian buyers, which also led to the emergence of Graeco-Scythian art. This flooded Scythia with various objects having the traditional local forms, but being made by Greek artists and craftsmen, and decorated at the level of the best achievements of Greek artistic crafts. Such objects were particularly intensively produced around the end of the 5th and in the 4th century BC. Since the influence of the demand of the consumer environment was reflected here predominantly

in the repertory of motifs and scenes decorating these objects, they may be examined on a par with the monuments of Scythian art proper as a valuable source about Scythian mythology. Let us take a closer look at this repertory.

The earliest monuments of Graeco-Scythian art contained zoomorphic images exclusively; they were preserved later as well, being combined with anthropomorphic figures and expanded scenes with many figures. It may be assumed that initially the Greek artists operated with the same zoological code which served as the basis for the Scythian animal style and was hence the most accessible pictorial language for the Scythian audience. This assumption is confirmed by observations on the concrete pictorial repertory of Graeco-Scythian animalist art. It was hardly a coincidence that the stag was the principal figure there, just as in the Scythian animal style. The two other "participants" from the zoomorphic compositions – the lion and the eagle-griffin – were not new to Scythia either. Naturally, here the lion had substituted the schematic





*Fig. 45. A battle scene. Detail from the decoration on a silver amphora from Chertomlyk*

*Fig. 46. A predator attacking a he-goat. Gold casing of a wooden vessel. The "Seven Brothers" barrow group*

predator customary to the animal style. On the other hand, the griffin is a rather natural synonym of a bird of prey. It is interesting to note that Greek artists depicted it precisely in the same way as the fantastic inhabitant of the lands to the north of Scythia, bearing the same name, has been described in the ancient literature: with a lion's body, an eagle's head and wings, i.e. corresponding fully to the notions of Scythian mythology. In this way, the three main zoomorphic images in Graeco-Scythian art are perfectly suitable for such a description of the ternary structure of the Universe.

It is important that in the interpretation of the Greek artists the griffin combined features of a bird of prey and of a predator, i.e. the two creatures correlated in Scythian notions with the two worlds of the dead – upper and lower. Thus, these monuments give a logical conclusion to the tendency of unifying the notion about these worlds and toward a binary interpretation of the Universe, which was noted earlier in the works of Scythian animal style.

Naturally, the character of the ren-

dering of these images by the Greek artists differed substantially from the approach known from Scythia earlier. In compliance to the Greek pictorial tradition from the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic periods, here the postures of the animals were much more varied, the modelling of their bodies was more realistic, the dynamism was more felt, being in contrast to the strict static nature of the zoomorphic images in Early Scythian art. This tradition could not have influenced the actual Scythian animal style, therefore at that time it revealed a tendency towards a greater emphasis on the realistic principle. From a semantic point of view, the works of art in the Graeco-Scythian series were called upon to implement the same task as the Early Scythian animalist art, i.e. that was a language intended to describe the Universe as a structure consisting of "this world", symbolized by the image of some hoofed animal (mainly stags) and the worlds beyond, which were opposed to it and were designated with the images of the lion and griffin.

An essentially new element for this





**Fig. 47. Griffins attacking a he-goat.**  
Silver vessel from Kul-Oba

**Fig. 48. Gold phiale from Solokha**

art was the actual way in which the pictorial text was built: not simply by juxtaposing the images included in it, but by introducing an active plot in the text. The role of such a plot could be played by the motif of the combat between animals (*Figs. 45-47*), because it could best express the idea underlying the cosmological concepts of the Scythians, i.e. the idea of the interactions between the world of mortals and the lethal "other worlds". Mythological thinking perceives death as a mandatory





element of the cyclic vital processes and even as a kind of sacrifice to the gods, who responded by acting as forces giving new life; that was a peculiar exchange of gifts between the world of the gods and the human world. The scene of the combat between the animals could be interpreted in such a context as the pictorial equivalent, expressed through zoomorphic images, of such a sacrifice, i.e. a functional substitute of the respective ritual.

It is not accidental that similar scenes

served in Scythia mainly for decorating objects belonging to a warrior's armament: scabbards and sheaths, gorytos, etc. If every death is a way of maintaining and of regenerating life, the killing of an enemy in battle was one of the ways of making such a sacrifice, and this is precisely the idea that has been invested in the images decorating the weapon destined to perform this act of sacrifice. Another sphere in which the motif of the struggle between animals is widespread is the decoration of ritual vessels: here



again the ritual function of the vessel – the sacrificial libation – and the content of the vessel's decoration seem to overlap, guaranteeing maximum effect of the sacrifice.

The way in which such scenes have been organized in the elaborate multi-figured pictorial texts is very interesting. An example in this respect is the gold phiale from the Solokha barrow (*Fig. 48*). The phiale is decorated with three concentric friezes consisting of numerous repetitions of the scene of a lion devouring a stag. Here the structure of the composition is built on the identification between the lower part in the vertical subsystem of the Cosmos and the periphery, characterized earlier, of the outer contour – in its horizontal subsystem: the scene serving as a symbolic way of expressing the characteristics of the nether, chthonic world is placed on the periphery of the vessel, its centre being identified with the centre of the Universe. The triple repetition of this frieze of scenes correlates well with the notion about the ternary nature of each of the three zones making up the Universe, typical of the cosmogony of the Indo-Iranians (cf. the Scythian standard from the Alexandropol barrow, where the upper world is designated with three figures of birds – *Fig. 49*).

It is necessary to note that the repertoire of animal images in Graeco-Scythian art also includes some animals which are either virtually not represented, or are very rare in Scythian animal style, though they are nevertheless not at all accidental in Scythian mythology. For example, cult objects made by Greek craftsmen, decorated with the images of swimming, flying and diving aquatic birds, have been found in various barrows in Scythia (*Fig. 50*). The available data on the zoomorphic symbolism which existed in the Scythian environment contain no information about these creatures, and it may be assumed that the popularity of that motif on the works

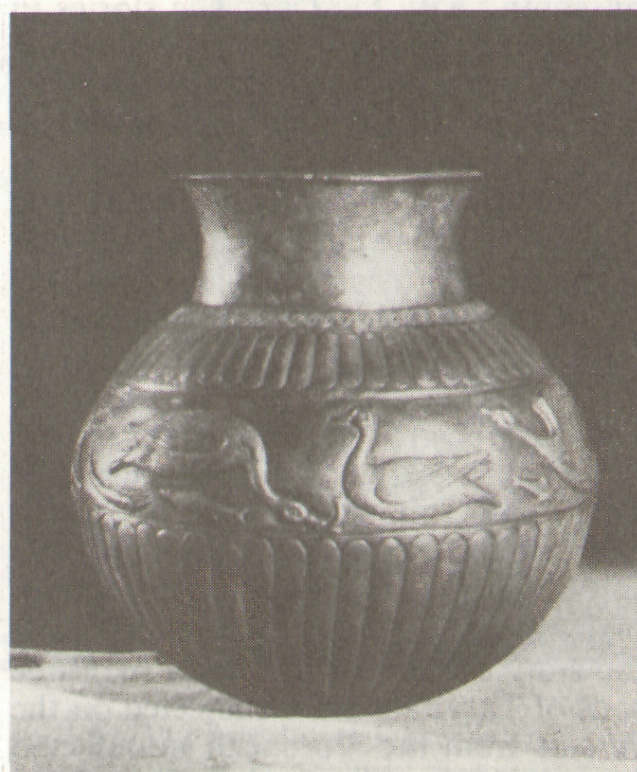
*Fig. 49. Bronze standard from the Alexandropol barrow*

*Fig. 50. Silver vessel from Kul-Oba, decorated with aquatic birds*

of Graeco-Scythian art was prompted exclusively by the preferences of the Greek artists. However, this conclusion is rejected by the comparative Indo-Iranian material: researchers have found a long time ago that in the traditions of these people the aquatic bird was opposed to the bird of prey very clearly as symbols of the corporal world and of the world beyond. This seems to be the key for interpreting the presence of aquatic birds in Scythian art as well.

The equine motif, which is extremely rare in the animal style, though it had a rather complex and detailed symbolism in the different Indo-Iranian traditions, acquired an equally unusual extensive occurrence in the works of art belonging to the Graeco-Scythian circle. Incidentally, in the concrete case we can draw both on the analogies from the related Scythian cultures and on the evidence of genuine Scythian folklore. Let us recall the story from the genealogical myth about Herakles, who accidentally found himself in the cave of the snake-legged goddess, while seeking his lost horses. This plot was essentially built in such a way that the hero's journey to the lands





where that chthonic creature lived (i.e. to the chthonic world beyond) became possible only because he was following the road along which his horse had gone. This technique concerning the plot is explained well with the notion in the Indo-Iranian tradition about the horse as a creature simultaneously linked to the three levels of the Universe and accordingly capable of penetrating into each of the three worlds. This notion most probably accounts for the popularity of the winged horse in Scythia, i.e. of the horse to which the upper, celestial world was also accessible. We shall come back to the problem of the link between the horse image and the ternary structure of the Cosmos again when we interpret some Graeco-Scythian monuments.

The cited examples are indisputable evidence that the Greek artists and craftsmen fulfilling Scythian orders were sufficiently familiar with the details of Scythian mythology and had a deep insight into the nature of the ideological notions of the society which they served. The expansion of the circle of the analysed and interpreted monuments belonging to that series allows us to claim with

growing certainty that there was not a single one among them, whose content had been prompted by the free fantasy of the Greek artist and was not a reverberation of the ideological order given by the Scythian environment. The Greek element in these works of art can be seen only in the artistic style and exquisite workmanship, the semantics being purely Scythian.

Precisely this profound knowledge of Scythian mythology by the Greek goldsmiths and artists allowed them to solve in the 4th century BC the artistic task which several centuries previously proved to be far beyond the capacity of the Ancient Eastern and Ionic artists, namely to create original compositions based on stories from the Scythian myths and to render Scythian mythological figures. Naturally, the character of Greek art itself in the early days of Hellenism also played a considerable part in this respect. The breaking of the rigid pictorial canonic norms, the striving to depict a wide range of plots and to express the emotional states of the participants in the scenes – all these features of Greek art created prerequisites for the success-



ful coping with the task. The stories in the mythology of an alien people, which were deprived of sacral implications in the eyes of the Greek artists and consequently allowed them sufficient freedom in the search for the optimum artistic solution, were a very favourable material for these artists. The ideological orders of the Scythians and the aesthetic aspirations of the Greeks coincided to a certain extent at that time, which also prepared the grounds for the appearance of a whole series of masterpieces of Graeco-Scythian toreutics, decorated with elaborate compositions.

Earlier we discussed many monuments from this series: the rendering of the story of the trial to which the three sons of Targitaos were subjected on the vessels from the Voronezh tumuli and from Kul-Oba, the further fate of the three brothers on the cup from Gaymanova barrow and on the gold comb from Solokha, the scene of the "ritual wedding" on the gold appliques from the different burials of the Scythian aristocracy, the depicting of the rite of organizing space by shooting with a bow and arrows in the appliques from Kul-Oba, etc. This series is being constantly added to. Naturally, archaeologists do not come across unique monuments of the type of the cup from Kul-Oba very often, but the gold appliques that decorated the festive apparel or the shrouds of the deceased, featuring different scenes and decorative motifs, which are kept in the Russian museums, already amount to hundreds (naturally, bearing in mind the recurrence of the same motif again and again many times). All these monuments feature ethnographically feasible Scythian figures in the context of some mythological or ritual scenes: the struggle of men in Scythian clothes against a griffin (Chertomlyk), the rite of two Scythians drinking together from one rhyton – most probably a ritual of concluding some contract involving a pledge or oath, referred to by Herodotus (IV,



*Fig. 51. A Scythian chasing a hare.  
Gold appliqué from Kul-Oba*

*Fig. 52. An eagle attacking a hare.  
Gold casing of a wooden vessel*

70) (Solokha, Kul-Oba), a female Scythian (a goddess?) with a dog in her feet and holding a bird in her hands (Chmyreva barrow), etc.

Most of the works of art of this type are believed to have been made in the cities of the Bosporan Kingdom. And indeed, the closer to the Bosphorus a Scythian burial was found, the more it contained similar Scythian scenes. Here the palm belongs to Kul-Oba, which is located on the territory of that state, in immediate proximity to its capital city, Panticapaeum.

There is a curious motif on the gold appliques from Kul-Oba (*Fig. 51*) and on the silver appliques from the Alexandropol barrow: a Scythian horseman is slaying a hare with a spear. Most scholars turn for the interpretation of the scene to the episode from the Scythian- Persian War, described by Herodotus (IV, 134), assuming that it was the scene depicted on the cited appliques. According to that story, at the moment when the troops of the two enemy forces were lined facing one another for the decisive battle, a hare ran in the direction of the Scythian soldiers. All Scythian warriors who saw the hare, forgot about their enemy and ran after the hare. Darius saw in this the greatest disrespect for his



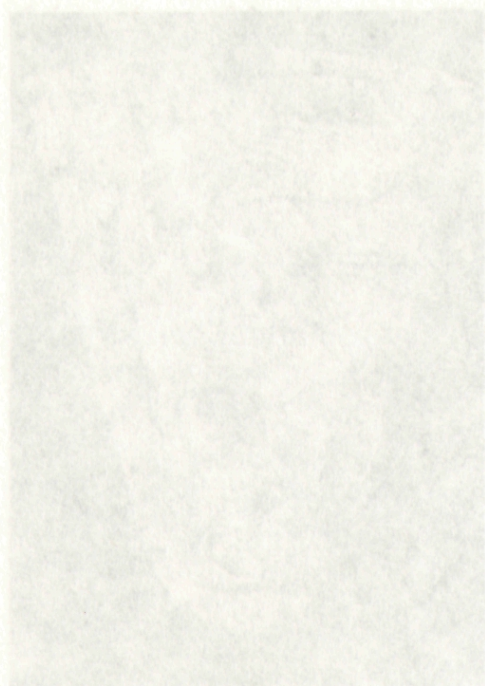


might; therefore, without accepting the fight, he hastened to leave Scythia. The content of this episode indeed demonstrates a striking coincidence with the cited images. However, the interpretation of the latter precisely as a rendering of that story is prevented by the circumstance that the motif of a horseman pursuing a hare is also found in the pictorial art of those regions of the Eurasian world that spoke the Iranian language, where the story about the Scythian-Persian War could not be popular and was probably hardly known at all. For example, a similar scene appears on the silver disc from the famous treasure from Oxus, found on the territory of ancient Bactria, but there it is combined with hunting scenes of stags and mountain goats, which at any rate are totally unrelated to the narrative about the Scythian-Persian War. E.E.Kuzmina compared the scene of interest to us on the disc from Oxus with an episode from the Ossetic Nartic epic tradition, in which one of the heroes persecuted a magnificent white hare. This hare proved to be the daughter of the water-god. One of the principal figures in the Nartic epic tradition – the already familiar Batraz – was born from the hero's marriage to that water

queen. The similarity between this story and Scythian mythology is beyond any doubt: let us recall only the daughter of the water-god – the progenitress of the Scythians – in the numerous versions of the Scythian genealogical myth.

A general explanation can be found for all motifs cited above: the episode of the Scythian-Persian War, the story about the birth of Batraz, and even the fact that the scene of the hare hunt was popular in the art of Scythia and of the areas that were culturally close to it, ensuing from the symbolism of the hare image, inherent to a large range of Indo-European peoples, including the Iranians. Here the hare stood for fertility, for the fruit-bearing forces in Nature. On this basis it is easy to reconstruct the existing notion among the Scythians about the offering of a hare as a sacrifice, as a means of acquiring wealth and all kinds of prosperity. Therefore, it was the Scythians who started running after the hare before the eyes of the enemy troops, because if they caught it, this would have guaranteed a good omen for the forthcoming battle. Incidentally, according to the evidence in Xenophon (*Kyropaideia* II, 4), that was how the Persian king Cyrus II assessed the fact





*Fig. 53. Silver amphora from Chertomlyk, with gilt*

*Fig. 54. Equine sacrifice. Detail from the frieze on the amphora from Chertomlyk*

that an eagle was devouring a hare before the eyes of his troops, while they were starting on their march. This is the reason for the popularity in Scythia of the motif of the hare hunt or the chasing of a hare by a dog, or its devouring by a bird of prey; the latter two scenes, as we became convinced earlier, are a symbolic equivalent of the offering of sacrifices (Fig. 52).

Thus, the adducing of a wide range of data about Scythian mythology and about different typological and genetic parallels reveals the semantic unity of the numerous monuments of Gracco-Scythian art, which are ostensibly very different in content and in the character



of the ideological concepts which they incarnate. Using the codes that existed in the Scythian environment and were well familiar to the Greek artists – symbolic zoological or narrative anthropomorphic – they all expressed the Scythian notion about the structure of the world, about the evolution of the vital processes, about the interrelations and interactions of all aspects of life. The deep insight of the Greek artists into the semantic unity of Scythian systems that were different in their code nature was best manifested in the pictorial texts consisting of many figures and having an extremely sophisticated structure, such as, e.g., some works of Gracco-Scythian





art. Considerable success has been scored in recent years in the de-ciphering of these texts. For example, we shall consider the interpretation of two objects of that type: the silver amphora from the Chertomlyk barrow (*Figs 53-55*) and the gold pectoral from Tolstaya barrow (*Figs 56-60*).

The amphora from Chertomlyk is one of the best known examples of Greek toreutics from the Scythian barrows. It has an egg-shaped body, narrow neck with mouth rim turning outwards, two vertical handles and a bottom that is not very high. The body of the amphora is covered by a floral motif that grows out in the form of two symmetrical twigs

from a palmette situated at the base, and twisting in a peculiar fashion over the entire body of the vase. Birds can be seen depicted on the twigs. In the lower part of the body there are three spouts. Two of them, on both sides, are shaped to resemble lion's heads, whereas the third one, which is oriented along the central axis of the decorative composition, depicts a winged horse; the wings of that horse spread over the vase's body, partly cover the floral motifs, while his head shapes the opening of the amphora. Two friezes with images appear one above the other on the shoulders of the vessel. The upper one reproduces scenes in which griffins are attacking stags.



The lower multi-figured frieze features Scythians and horses.

The content of the latter frieze contains to a great extent the key to decipher the semantics of the entire composition. For more than one hundred years after the Chertomlyk vase was discovered in 1863, most Scythologists have interpreted it as "Scythians in the midst of a herd": they saw in it only typical scenes of the catching, taming and domesticating of horses, which played such a major role in the everyday life and economy of Scythian nomads. Only recently this interpretation was reconsidered in a radically new way. Two specialists on the history and culture of the Scythians – E.E.Kuzmina and D.A.Machinskiy – simultaneously and apparently independently of one another, drew attention to the striking coincidence between the content of the central scene in this frieze and Herodotus' description of the Scythian practice of offering horses as a sacrifice.

According to Herodotus (IV, 60-61), Scythians offered horses as a sacrifice to their gods more often than other animals. For the purpose, they tied the animal's forelegs, then they brought it down by pulling the end of the rope with which the legs were tied, putting a loop on its neck, fastening it with the help of a stick to strangle the horse, while at the same time uttering a formula addressed to the deity for whom the sacrifice was intended. The vase from Chertomlyk shows precisely these operations, not in a sequence, but brought together in one scene and performed by the different participants in the ritual (as was required by the pictorial interpretation): two Scythians – one of them standing behind the horse, the other one being in front of it – are pulling the ropes tied in loops on each of the animal's forelegs, thus making it lie with the front part of his body close to the ground, while at the same time the third participant in the ritual, who is standing next to the

*Fig. 55. Detail from the decoration on the silver vessel from Chertomlyk*

horse's head, is fastening the noose thrown over the animal's neck. The ropes and the stick used for the strangling of the animal have not been preserved in the scene, but the postures of the three human figures and the position of their hands allows to reconstruct very easily the character of their actions.

Such an interpretation allows us to "read" the content of the whole Chertomlyk frieze as a series of actions making up the ritual of the horse sacrifice, whereby the scenes are depicted in such a way that the development of events is followed from the posterior part of the amphora to the anterior one, along both its sides. In the part of the frieze in the posterior part of the vessel the image of a freely grazing horse in the herd appears twice. This is followed by the moment of the catching of the horse, again reproduced twice – on the right and on the left. The subsequent scenes, which are immediately next to the central one, already differ in content: to the left, the Scythian is touching the horse's foreleg, as if to check whether it is suitable for





the ritual act; to the right, we see the horse with a saddle, at a moment when he is being tripped, apparently after it had completed some important itinerary in the context of the ritual. And finally, the action ends with the already described scene of the sacrifice. Indeed, there is a moment which hampers the interpretation of all these scenes as reproducing a series of interrelated events: in all scenes – except for the central one – there is no doubt that stallions have been depicted, whereas the principal “figure” in the central scene lacks any sexual attributes, which has given grounds to some researchers to assume that a mare had been depicted here, unlike the remaining groups. However, this means that the semantic link between the different elements of the frieze is lost and the logic of its construction remains unclear. It seems more probable that the specific features in the rendering of the various horses was prompted by the differences in their postures (in the latter scene it is simply not possible to see the genitalia, they are hidden behind the animal's hind

legs) and hence apparently the entire frieze narrates the “history” of a horse connected with a definite ritual.

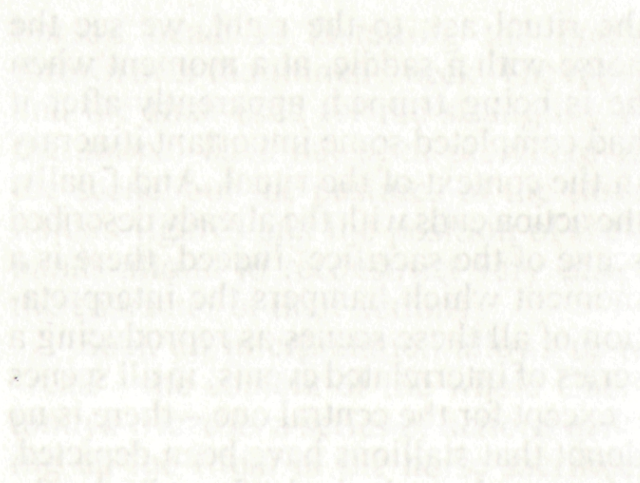
We have noted repeatedly the closeness of that ritual, as well as of some other specificities of the ritual attitude to horses in Scythia, to the ancient Indic ritual called “*aśvamedha*”, which was closely related to the king and to the regular renovation of his sacral force. In that ritual, the horse sacrifice – which is the central act – is preceded by his free wandering for one year, the itinerary of this wandering being interpreted as defining the territory subordinated to the king. This detail allows us to go even further in the parallel drawn between the Scythian and the Indic rite, and to recall the way in which the outlines of the possessions of the “temporary” king were determined in the annual religious festivities of the Scythians, described in the second chapter of this book, which – similar to the *aśvamedha* – was associated with the idea of the rejuvenating of the king's inherent strength: the possessions comprised the land which the



king's substitute could tour on horseback in one day. Could it be that the saddled horse on the Chertomlyk amphora travelled that road? Then the entire content of the Chertomlyk frieze could be interpreted as a chain of actions connected with these festivities (the choice of a horse, the determining of its fitness, the rounds of the territory intended for the temporary king), reconstructing yet another element related to the actual festivities and to the rituals following them, namely: the killing of the temporary king, because his sacrifice could be preceded by the sacrifice of his horse, to which such a semantically important role had been attributed in this ritual act.

Such an interpretation of the scene depicted on the Chertomlyk vase is directly associated with the content of its upper frieze, depicting the battle scene. On the one hand, this is a symbolic pictorial equivalent of the sacrifice, presented very naturalistically in the lower frieze; on the other, it is a symbol of the world beyond, opposed to the human world and serving as the addressee of the sacrifice depicted. And finally, this scene incarnates the cyclic vital processes, the alternation of life and death, i.e. the idea underlying the semantics of the calendar festivities with which, according to the proposed interpretation, the content of the scene in the frieze on the amphora is connected, all the more that the amphora itself most probably served as a ritual attribute in the cited sacrifice.

According to the currently prevalent opinion, the floral ornament with the birds on it, decorating the body of the amphora, symbolized the world tree, i.e. the image incarnating the cosmic structure and the link between the world of the gods and that of humans, each of which is represented in the decoration of the vase through one of the two friezes considered. In the context of the decoration of the amphora, this image designated the way along which the sacri-



*Fig. 56. Gold pectoral. Tolstaya Mogila*

fice went from the human world to the world of the gods. D.A.Machinskiy and E.E.Kuzmina have launched the assumption that the actual tripartite nature of the entire composition decorating the amphora was prompted by the inherent Scythian notion about the triple structure of the Universe; then the lower register of that composition – the image of the floral ornament – should be specifically correlated to the lower, chthonic world. However, such an interpretation correlates poorly with the semantics of





the image of the world tree, which is not associated with the lower zone of the Cosmos, but symbolizes world order as a whole. Another observation of D.A. Machinskiy seems more essential here. He has drawn attention to the fact that among the grave goods in the Chertomlyk barrow, the amphora of interest to us seemed to form an ensemble with the silver vessel found next to it, because it was into this vessel that the liquid had to flow from the spouts of the amphora in the course of the ritual libations. An

important characteristic feature here is that the handles of the cited vessel are decorated with images of a female deity, whose lower part of the body is replaced by floral ornaments. We have already seen such an image on the bone plaque from the comb found in the Gaymanovaya barrow, its analysis revealing its closeness to images of the snake-legged goddess and the indisputable links with the chthonic world. Apparently, the structure of the decoration of the amphora and of the vessel from Chertomlyk



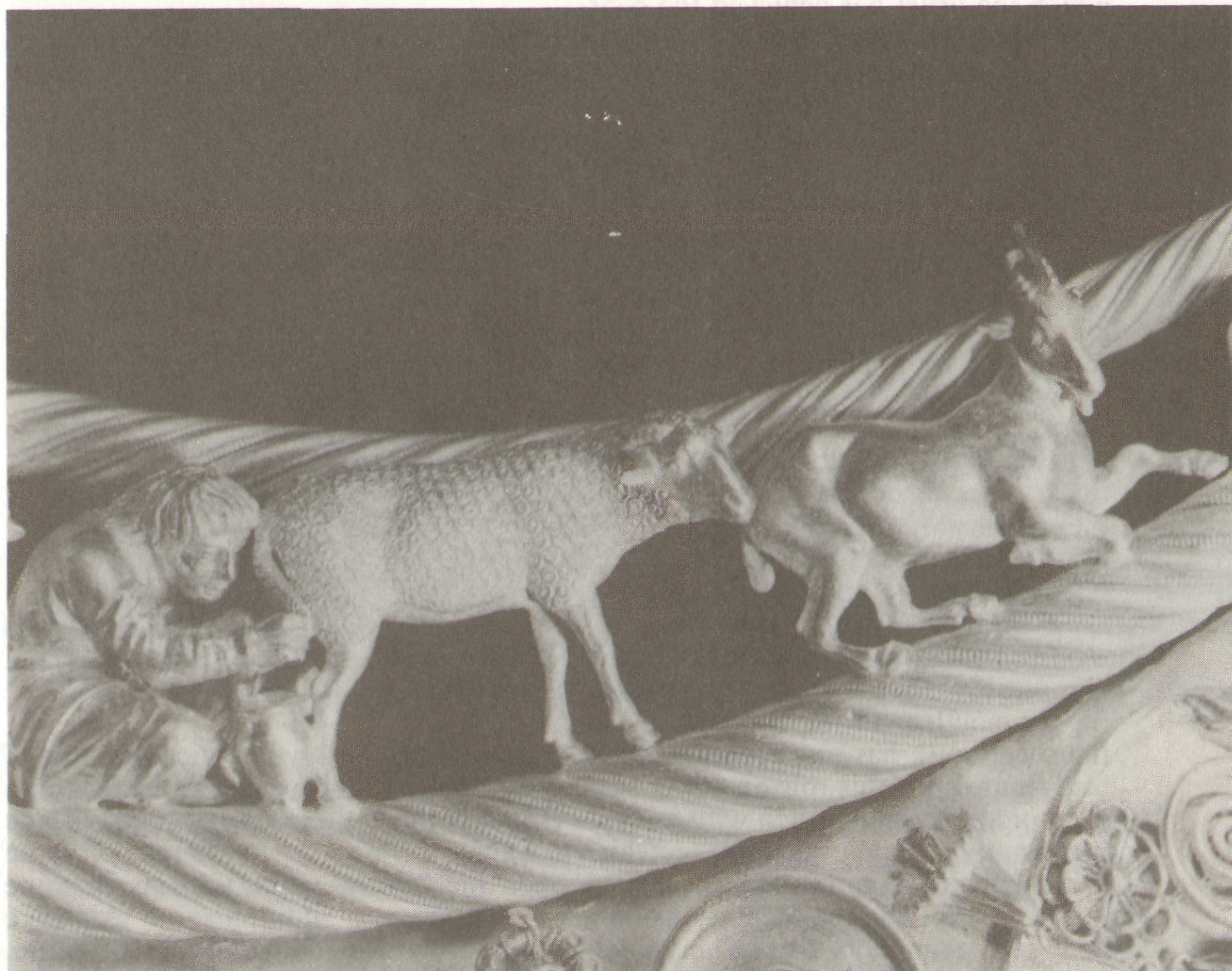


*Fig. 57. The pectoral from Tolstaya Mogila. Detail from the upper frieze*

*Fig. 58. The pectoral from Tolstaya Mogila. Detail from the upper frieze*

should be examined together: the vessel and the images depicted on it correlate with the lower level of the Universe, the frieze on the amphora featuring the horse sacrifice – with the middle world, and the frieze with the battle scenes above them – with the celestial world of the gods. The world tree, whose image occupies the central space on the body of the amphora, is the element interlinking the three worlds. This is why, precisely on it is the protomé of the winged horse: the creature which, as we have pointed out already, is correlated in the Scythian picture of the world with the three worlds, in this sense being semantically identical to the world tree. For the same reason, the horse is the





principal sacrificial animal in the Scythian environment, called upon "to travel" to other worlds and to bring to the inhabitants of those worlds the prayers of the persons performing the sacrifice.

The silver amphora from Chertomlyk is a sacral attribute possessing a very elaborate semantics, which has partly found adequate incarnation in the decorative system of that amphora. The Greek artist has succeeded in penetrating to the very essence of the system of notions underlying the ritual in which the amphora was used. An even more complex task of that kind faced the author of the other masterpiece of Graeco-Scythian toreutics: the pectoral from Tolstaya barrow (*Figs 56-60*).

The discovery of this pectoral by the archaeologist from Kiev B.N. Mozolevskiy in 1971 caused an unprecedented sensation in Scythian studies at least since the time of the excavations of Chertomlyk, perhaps even throughout its entire history. Even leaving aside the exquisiteness of the workmanship of this work of art, and it is indeed striking, attention is attracted by the complexity of the compositional solution of the pectoral and by the wealth of mythological information invested in it. B.N. Mozolevskiy has justifiably pointed out that the abundance of images depicted on the pectoral is unparalleled throughout the ancient monuments of Scythia. No less important is the virtuosity with



which the artist has achieved the coordination between each image and its place in the composition, reflecting to an equal extent its inherent semantics.

The pectoral is a gold open-work decorative object consisting of four twisted and interwoven wires, joined at both ends with lion's heads, by means of which it is fastened at the back of the neck. The wires are shaped like eccentric circles and the space between them forms three lunar fields, which are filled with different images. The central place in the upper frieze is given to the figures of two men, stripped to the waist, spreading a shirt made of sheepskin, which they are apparently sewing or mending. On both sides of them one can see female domestic animals with their young. Between them, on each side, there is a figure of a Scythian youth: one of them is milking a sheep, another one is closing the mouth of an amphora, into which the sheep milk has just been poured. A bird figure ends this row on either side. The middle frieze is filled with a winding acanthus floral ornament, on which five small bird's figures can be perceived: it is very similar to the decoration on the body of the amphora from Chertomlyk, originating in exactly the same way from a trifoil palmette. The middle part of the lower field is occupied by the scene of the fight between a horse and a pair of griffins, repeated three times; closer to one end there is a pair of lions (or a lion and a leopard), fighting with a stag, at the opposite end – the same pair of predators is fighting against a boar. Closer to the ends of the frieze, on both sides, one can perceive a dog chasing a hare. The frieze ends on the right and on the left with a pair of cricket's heads turned to one another (male and female – according to the identification given by entomologists).

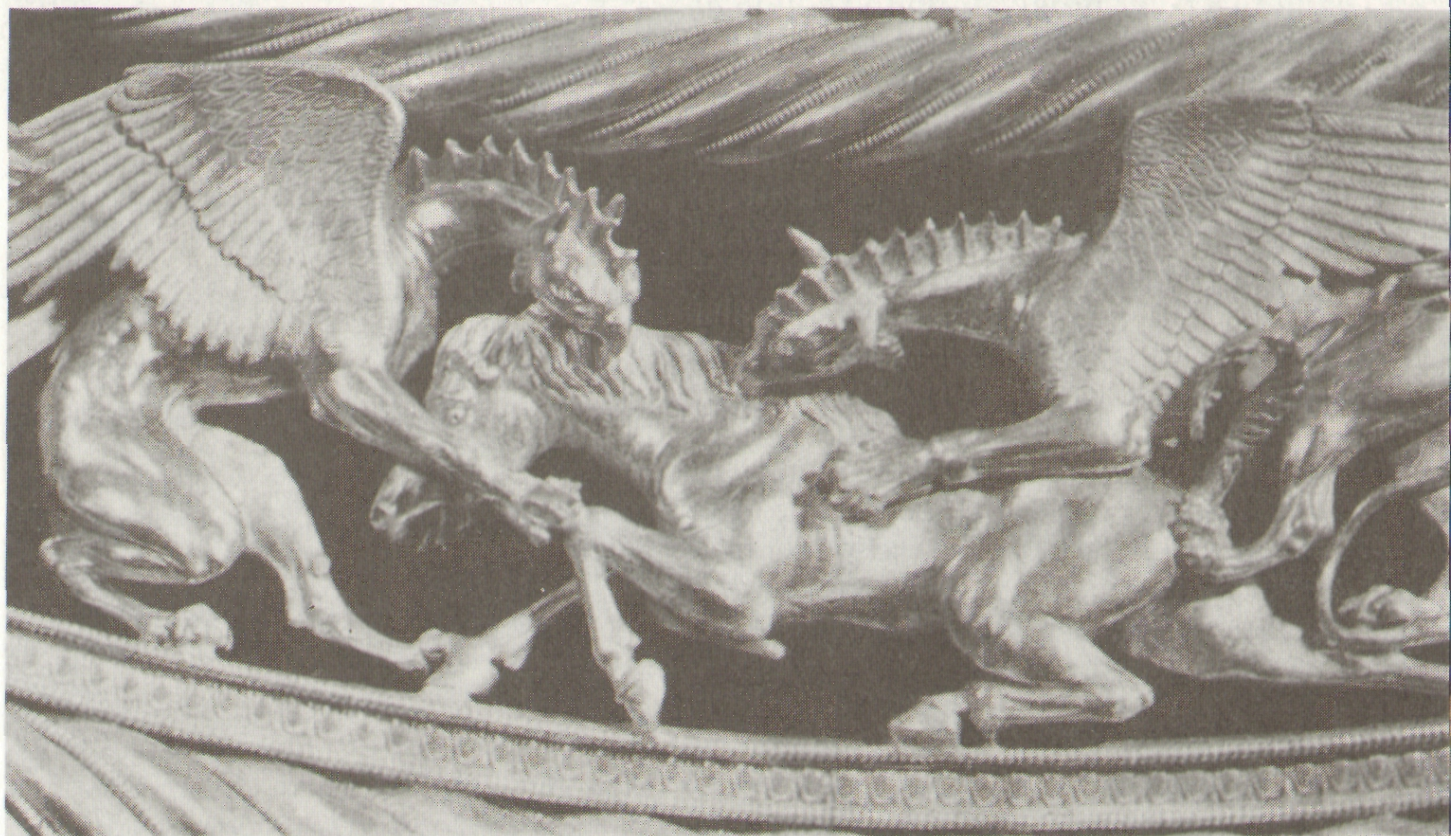
From the description presented, it can be seen that the author of the pectoral has used the same codes which we analysed earlier separately as means of

*Fig. 59. The pectoral from Tolstaya Mogila. Detail from the lower frieze*

expressing the mythological picture of the world, which existed in the Scythian environment: there are anthropomorphic figures here as well – heroes of some mythical story or participants in some ritual act – in addition to an extensive repertory of symbolic scenes of battle, and a floral motif, which is interpreted in other works of art as the incarnation of the world tree. Being subordinated to the strict laws of composition, these motifs are organized in a unified pictorial text by using the spatial code.

The first striking thing when one looks at the pectoral is the marked opposition between the character of the scenes depicted at the two extreme registers (the middle register will be referred to a little later): on one of them, the female animals nursing their young clearly incarnate birth and the perpetuation of life (naturally, this semantic circle again comprises the motif of the milking of the animals, also associated with fruit-bearing Nature); at the other extreme one can see the battle scenes, which we have already analysed more





than once: the metaphor of death (close to that is the motif of the hare chased by the dog). These two friezes are opposed as the world of life and the world of death, which fully correlates with their mutual orientation in the space of the pectoral: the first one being placed higher than the second one, which corresponds to the position of the worlds symbolized by them in the cosmological model analysed earlier. The uniqueness of the composition of the pectoral consists, however, in the success of the artist to present in one pictorial structure the two spatial subsystems – vertical and horizontal – of that model, referred to in the third chapter: indeed, the relation between these friezes demonstrates not only the opposition between “above” and “below”, but also the opposition between the centre and the periphery, because the lower frieze seems to encircle the field marked by the upper one. Therefore, the composition of the pectoral clearly suggests that the world of death is localized simultaneously both above the world of the living, and around it, in the external

zone of the Universe.

All remaining characteristics of the two friezes compared are subordinated to the idea of the confrontation between the world of life and that of death. Thus, for example, human figures are seen only in the upper frieze, again there domestic animals appear exclusively, because they are around man in his everyday life: hence this is the human world, a mastered and ordered world. There are no human figures in the lower frieze, wild and even fantastic animals predominate: this is a world opposed to everything that is ordinary, a world beyond, and at the same time a world that has not been conquered, a world of chaos.

The link – in terms of both composition and semantics – between the two registers and the worlds they represent is the floral ornament: the world tree depicted in the middle register.

Everything stated so far suggests that owing to the deep meaning invested in the particular position of the different motifs on the pectoral, it represents an intricate pictorial cosmogram, reflect-



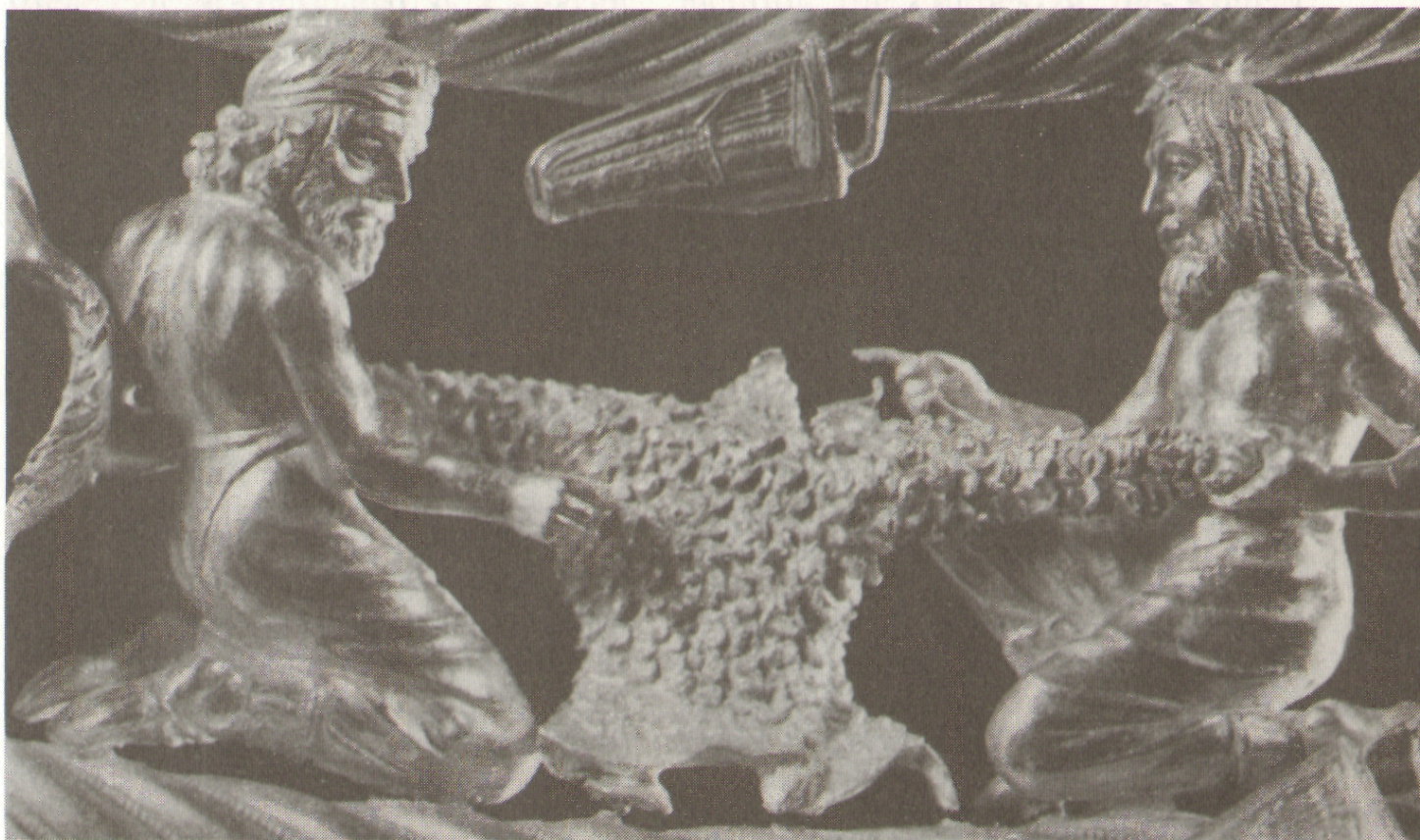
ing in a concentrated form the notion of the Scythians about the structure of the world and about the processes taking place in it. Moreover, in the concrete case the cosmological model is built on a binary basis: the world beyond appears here in the binary nature of its upper and lower hypostases, hence the presence of the fighting griffins (the upper world) and predators (the nether world) is not accidental at all. However, the position of these figures with respect to one another is also subordinated to the task of expressing the cosmic pattern through the means of the topographic code: the griffins fighting against the horses are at the centre of the lower frieze, while the predators are closer to its ends. In this way, the semantics of the pectoral reflects in another system of spatial coordinates the opposition between centre and periphery, which corresponds to the correlation between "above" and "below"

However, the specific features discussed so far do not exhaust the semantically significant regularities of the compositional solution of the work of art under consideration. It is interesting to note the incomplete identity of its left and right side. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the pectoral must have been used not so much to be looked at, but rather as an element of the ritual apparel of its owner. Therefore, later we shall refer to the left and to the right side of the pectoral from the point of view of the person wearing it, not of the onlooker. The most remarkable difference between the two parts is that in the right-hand part the predators are attacking a stag, on the left – a boar. The bird figurines linking the ends of the upper frieze also differ: there is a duck on the right and some bird of prey resembling a falcon on the left. The head of the human figure on the right, in the central scene, has a band-like diadem on his head, which is absent on the

*Fig. 60. The pectoral from Tolstaya Mogila. The central scene*

head of the person on the left. And finally, the different position of the gorytos with the bow for these figures: the one on the right has the gorytos hanging above his head, whereas for the person on the left it is lying on the ground. A careful scrutiny of this series of differences will reveal that all of them reflect the opposition between "above" and "below" in one way or another: in spatial or semantic (cosmological) terms. This is reflected most clearly by the position of the bows. As regards the diadem, it is a status symbol, perhaps even something like royal insignia for a number of figures in Scythian works of art (e.g. for Herakles-Targitaos on the cup from Kul-Oba), hence they marked the top of the social hierarchy. The different bird figurines already demonstrate the familiar symbolism: the aquatic bird is connected with the corporal world, whereby the bird of prey is associated with the world beyond, which – as we became convinced – is localized in the system of the pectoral precisely below,





under the human world. And finally, turning to the animals that are depicted as the prey, we must remember that the boar is the only carnivorous hoofed animal, which brings it closer to the predators, which are correlated in the zoological symbolism of Scythia with the cosmic "below". It is curious, as E.V.Perevodchikova has noted, that the images of boars in Scythian animal style feature some techniques that are otherwise characteristic of the rendering of predators only, and cannot be seen in ungulates. Therefore, boars in Scythian culture prove to be closer to the predators than to its related animals according to the conventional zoological classification.

Consequently, all signs for "above" proved to be correlated with the right-hand side of the pectoral, the elements for "below" – with the left-hand side. Similar semantic pairs are essentially cultural universalia that can be traced both among ancient peoples and in contemporary traditional cultures.

Summarizing the analysis of the

composition of the pectoral, we can say that the topographic code here seems to have been used in three "dimensions": in the opposition of the registers to one another, the centre and the periphery within each register, and finally their right and their left parts. All this complex system of relations has allowed the structure of the Cosmos to be depicted using different means in this work of art, as it appeared in the notions of the Scythians.

The next level of interpretation of the pectoral presupposes an analysis of the repertory of motifs represented in each of its registers. Let us start with the lower frieze. As we have noted already, it consists predominantly of battle scenes. In this connection, it is important precisely which animals were the object of the assault: horses, stags and boars. It is remarkable that the excavations of Tolstaya barrow, where the pectoral was found, yielded the bones of precisely these three animal species – in the trench surrounding the barrow. Such a coincidence is not at all arbitrary. When Scyth-



ians performed the burial rite, they usually discarded in the trench the bones of the animals which the participants in the rite consumed in the course of the *trisna*, i.e. the ritual closely connected with the life that exists in spite of death, and even owing to death. However, we were convinced that such is the idea behind the images on the pectoral: the animals assaulted in the scenes of the lower register died in the name of the act of birth, incarnated in the images in the upper register, this is a sacrifice in the name of the multiplying of domestic animals, which were the biggest wealth of the Scythians. Horses, stags and boars were apparently the traditional set of sacrificial animals for the community to which the dynast buried in the Tolstaya barrow belonged, this is evidenced both by the content of the images on the pectoral, and by the remains of the burial *trisna*.

It is no less important that the scene of the attack of the horse by griffins has been repeated three times on the pectoral. This is indisputably connected with the idea about the ternary Cosmos in the Scythian picture of the world and with the circumstance that the horse is interpreted in Scythia as a creature belonging to all three cosmic zones. The same idea probably underlies the tradition presented in some Scythian barrows (e.g. in Chertomlyk) to build three additional graves containing horse burials during the funeral.

At the same time, it must be noted that according to V.N. Toporov's hypothesis, the *trisna* ritual among the Indo-Europeans was initially characterized by a ternary structure, again prompted by the same cosmological idea and being expressed in its actual Slavonic name, derived from the root *tri-* meaning "three". In connection with the interpretation proposed by him, for this reason the *trisna* had to comprise the sacrifice of three animals, either of the same or of different species. The pecto-

ral depicts three types of ternary structure: the lower frieze shows the death of three animals, whereby in all three cases the prey is a horse.

This interpretation of the meaning of the lower frieze on the pectoral correlates well also with the presence of a scene of a hare being chased by a dog. This is one of the pictorial elements of the sacrificing of a hare; earlier we discussed the meaning of this ritual as a means of guaranteeing fertility.

The cricket, whose image ends the lower frieze of the pectoral on both sides, is specially associated with the lower world in the different ancient cultures. The fact that crickets are presented here in pairs, male and female, undoubtedly expresses the same idea about the life-giving function of Nature, to which the entire content of this register is subordinated.

Let us turn now to the content of the upper frieze. As we mentioned already, it is dominated by the motif of the feeding of the young, which suggests the main meaning of the composition. No less important is the actual assortment and the sequence of the creatures depicted there. If we exclude the small figures of birds that flank the frieze and the images of the youths engaged with the milking, who perform a merely auxiliary role, on both sides of the frieze, from the centre to the periphery, we see a human being, a horse, a cow, a sheep and a goat. In the different Indo-European – and above all Indo-Iranian – systems, this is the traditional hierarchic order of the creatures to be sacrificed. Moreover, the ancient Indic tradition, for example, treats this order in the aggregate of all its components as "five parts of livestock", and whoever knows this interpretation, "possesses livestock, lives the years predetermined for him, lives in splendour, being rich in posterity and livestock, and being great with glory" (*Chandogya Upanishada* II, 18). In other words, the upper part of the



frieze can be considered as a kind of pictorial equivalent to the magic formula guaranteeing well-being, and above all multiplication of the livestock.

Now we are to examine the principal element of the decoration of the pectoral: the central scene of the upper frieze. As was mentioned already, two male figures sewing a garment made of sheepskin are depicted. The first thing to be noticed is the specific character of the garment, which cannot be found on any image of a Scythian, whether made by a Greek artist or on a Scythian stone statue. Naturally, it may be assumed that Scythians usually wore such a garment with the fur on the inside and that only here it was depicted turned inside out, because the scene reproduced the procedure of its sewing. However, the ancient author Julius Polydeuces (VII, 70) mentions a garment which existed among the Scythians, called *sisirna*, which he characterized as a "fur chiton, hairy and with sleeves". The special emphasis on the "hairiness" apparently presupposed that the furs of which the *sisirna* was made were turned with the fur out. Julius Polydeuces mentions nothing about the functions of the *sisirna*, but the very fact that it differed from the ordinary clothing of the Scythians, seems to suggest its ritual character. The actual pectoral from Tolstaya barrow was also not intended for ordinary cult ceremonies. The hypothesis that it depicted the sewing of a garment to be worn in everyday life seems dubious; it is much more likely that the central scene depicted a purely ritual act. This conclusion finds support in abundant historical and ethnographic evidence.

Since ancient times and to our days, different peoples have cherished the faith in the magic properties of the animal skin (of the sheep fleece in the first place) and of the clothes made of it, in their ability to secure fertility and all kinds of well-being and prosperity in general. As regards the antiquity, it is sufficient to

mention the clothes of the Roman Lares, the links between the fleece and the Hittite Telepinus – the deity of Nature who is dying and is being reborn, the use of wool in the Eleusinian mysteries and in the cult of the Slav "god of livestock" Veles-Volos. The more recent ethnography of some peoples is familiar with the custom of placing newlyweds on a sheepskin turned with the wool out, in order to guarantee numerous progeny for them; another custom was for the parents of the newlyweds to be dressed in such furs when they welcome the newlywed couple after the wedding. A sheepskin coat turned inside out made the labour of women easier, while to stockbreeders it promised good and abundant offsprings of their domestic animals. Many similar examples, borrowed from varied traditions, can be cited, but the arguments presented so far demonstrate sufficiently clearly the remarkable closeness between all notions connected with the fleece and the complex of ideas defining the semantics of the pectoral as a whole, characterized earlier. It is no less important that the action depicted in the central scene – sewing – is also associated with the notion of fertility and of the life-giving forces in Nature. In this way, the content of the scene becomes an integral element in the interpretation of the pectoral, proposed on the basis of the comprehensive analysis of its composition and of all motifs included in its decoration.

Naturally, it would have been much more tempting if we did not restrict ourselves to such a general interpretation of the scene and if we identified the participants in it with concrete figures from Scythian mythology. Unfortunately, among the preserved fragments we would not find even one whose decoration resembles in any way the content of the image studied. However, some indirect evidence allows us nevertheless to make certain definite comparisons.

S.S. Bessonova drew attention to a



detail in the legend written in Khorezm about Husham-Shah. Among the 72 crafts which that person learned from the demons and which he taught other people, there was the art to sew leather clothes. This evidence is even more interesting for us, bearing in mind that Husham-Shah was the hero Hušeng, known to us from the ancient Iranian mythical and epic tradition. Shahname attributes the same cultural activity to Hušeng: in the words of Firdousi, he taught people "to sew clothes from the skins of beasts" and advised them "to breed their domestic animals in pairs, so that there would be offspring". This lesson correlates directly with the content of the upper frieze in our pectoral. In other words, the activities of Hušeng as a typical mythological hero-civilizer feature most prominently those moments through which the upper frieze of the pectoral became a sign of the cultural and mastered world, opposed to the unmastered and chaotic world, which is depicted in the images on the lower frieze. Hence one of the heroes in the scene under consideration proved to be very close to Hušeng in a number of his characteristics.

However, two persons are depicted on the pectoral. In the second chapter it was mentioned already that in the Iranian tradition Hušeng appeared together with his brother Vegerd, the first one being the progenitor of the kings and warriors, the second one – of the ordinary members of the community. As we have mentioned already, such a social hierarchy also characterizes the figures of interest to us in the central scene: it is demonstrated by the band-diadem on the head of one of them, i.e. a status symbol.

Having revealed this similarity of the heroes from the scene with Hušeng and Vegerd, we cannot fail to remember that a functionally identical pair of figures is also known from Scythian mythology: these are the brothers Palos and

Napes from Diodorus' version of the genealogical myth, the progenitors of the two social groups. Everything said earlier about the semantics of these images, as well as about their analogues – Kolaxais and Arpoxais – from the other version of the myth, allows us to claim that it correlates fully with the place which the scene of interest to us occupies in the structure of the pectoral, with the opposition between its right and left side, expressing a whole system of spatial, cosmological and social relations. It is clear that the absence of evidence about a plot that would be similar to the content of that scene, whose heroes would be the cited Scythian mythological persons, does not allow us to identify with them unambiguously the figures in the scene studied. However, it would be hardly correct to overlook the cited chain of such significant coincidences.

And finally, we shall dwell on yet another point. According to the existing interpretation of the not perfectly clear Avestan text devoted to the Goddess Arti (Aši) – lašt XVII, it reflects the incompletely preserved myth about the fight of two related tribal groups for this goddess and about her attempts to hide from them three times in a ram's fleece. One cannot fail to be impressed by the coincidence between numerous motifs of this reconstructed plot and the semantics of the pectoral reconstructed here. Two competing related clans appear in the myth – on the pectoral we see two male figures, probably brothers; in the myth the goddess hides from them three times – the entire structure of the pectoral also reflects a ternary model; the goddess finds refuge in a sheepskin – a garment made of such a skin is the central element in the composition on the pectoral as well; and finally Arti herself, according to the text of lašt XVII, grants material welfare, including the rich flocks, and it is precisely that aspect of life which determines the entire content of the decoration of the pectoral and of its structure.





*Fig. 61. Bronze standard from the Alexandropol barrow*

If such a comparison is justified, the pectoral from Tolstaya barrow proves to be an extremely convincing argument in confirmation of the argument presented in the first chapter of this book about the identity of one of the goddesses in the Scythian pantheon – Artimpasa – with the Iranian Arti. D. A. Machinskiy already assumed the links between the pectoral and the cult of this Scythian goddess, but the Avestan evidence cited here, which is largely in support of this hypothesis, has unfortunately remained outside the scope of his research.

Consequently, the pectoral from Tolstaya barrow has a very complex and multi-layered semantics. It is at the same time a cosmogram incarnating the notion about the structure of the universe and a ritual attribute aimed at guaranteeing well-being and prosperity to its owner and to the community which he represented. Great skills were required of the Greek artist who made this masterpiece, he had to gain an insight into an alien mythology, to understand the mythological concepts inherent to it in the entire complexity





of the links characterizing them, and to find an adequate artistic rendering of this entire range of ideas. The artist has coped admirably with this task. As a result, we are faced with a pictorial text which is not in the least inferior with respect to the wealth of the mythological information invested in it even to the most extensive narration of the Scythian myths, preserved by the ancient authors. We have devoted so much attention to the analysis of the pectoral precisely because the penetration into the essence of such monuments enriches our notions about Scythian mythology to a no lesser extent than the knowledge of the written tradition.

It should be pointed out that the appearance and the rather wide occur-

rence of Greek goods and objects of art, similar to the analysed vessels and pectoral, in the Scythian environment, could not fail to influence significantly the entire cultural life of Scythia. In fact, this contributed to the introduction of a new code in Scythian life, intended for the presentation and dissemination of cultural information, mythological information included. In addition to the symbolic zoomorphic compositions of the animal style or of Greek animalist art, there also appeared images of anthropomorphic figures, including scenes and even narrative pictorial texts that render the mythological plot in evolution in the form of a cycle of successive scenes.

This code disseminated rather quickly among the Scythians. It appears that





*Fig. 62. Goddess with stags. Plaque from the Alexandropol barrow*

*Fig. 63. A hero fighting against a griffin. Bronze standard from Slonovskaya Bliznitsa*

Scythian society at that time was experiencing an acute need of such monuments. Greek artists quickly became aware of that need and responded very efficiently.

However, the creation of strictly original compositions on themes and scenes that were entirely new to Greek art was not simple and by far not every Greek artist or goldsmith proved to be sufficiently competent and skilled to cope successfully with that task. The demand for objects of this type was clearly much higher than the supply, so Scythian craftsmen tried to satisfy these needs as best they could. This explains the appearance in the 4th century BC of anthropomorphic figures clearly made by local craftsmen, in addition to

the highly artistic compositions "on Scythian themes" betraying the high class of Greek workmanship. Naturally, Scythian art was much inferior to the Greek, being rather coarse and primitive, but it is nevertheless interesting for us, because it strove to express the same mythological images and notions.

We have already analysed in detail the standard from Lysaya Gora, which reflects Scythian notions about space. To the same group of works of art we should attribute perhaps the bronze standards from the Alexandropol barrow, featuring the image of the Scythian goddess (*Fig. 61*). Here she is depicted stripped to the waist, the lower part of her body being schematically rendered by means of radial lines, which appar-



ently stood for the already familiar image of the deity having a snake-like or floral palmette instead of legs. Wings are hinted behind the shoulders of the goddess. There is no doubt that the analysed Greek images of the Scythian chthonic goddess served as models to the Scythian craftsman.

Another image of a Scythian anthropomorphic female deity has also been found in the same Alexandropol barrow, but this time on silver-plated iron plaques (*Fig. 62*). Here the figure of the goddess, given in full size and with wings spread behind her shoulders, serves as the vertical axis of the composition, which also includes the protomes of two stags on both sides of the deity. The primitive workmanship does not prevent us from identifying in this composition the already familiar pattern, called upon to render the notion about the structure of space: the female figure symbolizes the axis mundi, the animals on either side of her are correlated to the directions of the world.

The bronze standards from the Slonovskaya Bliznitsa barrow demonstrate the rather rare case when the Scythian craftsman had tried to create a complex multi-figured composition (*Fig. 63*). The image is so primitive in execution that it is even difficult to discern its meaning. According to the most widely accepted interpretation of standards, it represented an anthropomorphic figure slaying a griffin with a lion's head with a short sword, while the griffin in its turn is killing some other beast. According to the already familiar pattern from other battle scenes, this beast should be a hoofed animal; such is the interpretation in another Scythian monument featuring a similar scene – on the gold appliqué from the barrow near the village of Durovka. However, the artist who created the standards in question unjustifiably gave a predator's paws to that animal. B. N. Grakov treats the standards from Slonovskaya Bliznitsa as depicting

one of the heroic deeds of Targitaos, fighting against some mythical monster.

It is interesting to note that all these primitive anthropomorphic images in Scythian execution have been found in very rich burials of representatives of the higher Scythian aristocracy. For example, the Alexandropol barrow, from which some of the finds from this series originated, is the biggest among the royal barrows in Scythia. This confirms the theory that the reason for the existence of such objects is their relative cheapness compared with the Greek masterpieces, as well as the impossibility to meet the demand for pictorial monuments of mythological content exclusively with Greek works of art. This circumstance also gave rise to yet another series of very original monuments.

Earlier, when we analysed the images representing the ritual marriage of the Scythian king and the goddess, we mentioned the gold plaque found in the barrow near the village of Sakhnovka. Some years ago, the specific features of that plaque attracted the attention of S. S. Bessonova and of the author of this book. We were impressed by the combination of features characteristic of totally different levels of workmanship, which seem to be incompatible in one work of art. On the one hand, this is the striking coarseness and primitiveness of execution, coupled with the very poor organization of the space of the scene: many details are very unclear, the intervals between the figures are very irregular, and in some places figures are very close to one another. On the other hand, many elements bring the plaque from Sakhnovka close to the best examples of Graeco-Scythian toreutics. For example, the very attempt to depict a scene with so many – ten – figures is perfectly atypical for the works of Scythian artists and craftsmen. Instead of simpler images in full face or profile, which are easier to depict, the scene is dominated by rather elaborate positions and postures. The ar-



tistic solutions in the different groups of figures making up the composition are also extremely varied, and in its entirety it is characterized by a clear and well contemplated rhythm: practically all scenes are symmetrical with respect to the central one, which presents the actual moment of the ritual marriage.

Such a combination of ostensibly incompatible specificities could be explained, if we assume that the plaque from Sakhnovka was not a primary monument, but was a copy of a highly artistic original, e.g. of the decoration in relief of some metal vessel of the type of the vase from Kul-Oba, being copied by purely mechanical means, e.g. by stamping on a thin gold plaque. In this process many details of the relief were obviously insufficiently clearly imprinted, and were finished by the not so skillful hand of the Scythian craftsman. Since the original scene was on a spheric surface, it was impossible to make an imprint of it on the flat plaque in one go: this had to be done in parts, and by shifting the plaque from one place to another, the regularity of the intervals between the figures was broken. The proposed solution of the problem about the origin of the plaque from Sakhnovka also explains something nonsensical in the composition: the group of Scythians on the extreme left, who are offering a sacrifice, are facing the end of the plaque, their backs being turned to the central scene. In the decorative system of the vessel this group was localized on that part of its surface, which is diametrically opposed to the central scene, hence the figures in it were also facing that central scene.

Some other pictorial monuments in 4th century BC Scythian barrows could also be assumed to have had a similar origin. They all demonstrate once again the increased demand for scenes and images with mythological content, as well as the existence of different ways of satisfying that demand.

And finally, we should devote attention to yet another fact in the cultural history of Scythia at that time. Practically simultaneously with the varied images on themes from Scythian mythology, which we considered, numerous works of art decorated with scenes from Greek myths, executed indisputably by Greek artists and craftsmen, began to appear in Scythian barrows. There we find numerous images of Herakles, Medusa, Achilles, etc. Moreover, the types and shapes of the objects decorated with similar motifs were strictly local: gorytos types, scabbards of akinakes-type swords, details from horse-trappings, etc. Consequently, these were objects intended to be marketed precisely in a Scythian environment and catering to the demand there. What should then be the explanation for the fact that they were decorated with the images of figures from Greek mythology?

The most logical first thought appears to be that the close cultural contacts between the Scythian and the ancient world resulted in the propagation of the Greek cults in the Scythian environment, or at least that there was a Scythian interest in the Greek legends and myths, though devoid of any religious substratum. Many researchers tend to accept such an explanation. However, it allows to interpret by far not all facts connected with the existence of the ancient works of art in Scythia.

For example, it is perfectly unclear why the beginning of the propagation of Greek mythological images among the Scythians coincided precisely with the moment when the anthropomorphic images of their own mythical figures gained popularity there. The process of penetration of Greek cults into Scythia must have been very long and gradual, therefore the monuments and works of art reflecting had to be found in Scythian complexes sporadically at first, having become widespread only after a certain period of time. However, this hypothesis



does not correspond to the laws governing the distribution and propagation of the images in that series in Scythian barrows. Another very important circumstance is that Scythian monuments depict only a strictly limited range of Greek mythological images and scenes, while others – including those that were most important from the point of view of Greek religious and mythological thinking – were totally unknown in Scythia. For example, among the numerous images of Herakles, there is indisputable prevalence of the scene in which he is fighting the lion (*Fig. 64*), or the images of that hero from the same myth, in which he is depicted with a helmet of a lion's scalp. All of the other Labours of Herakles were practically unknown here. Goryti decorated with scenes from the life of Achilles have already been found in four Scythian barrows. They depict in succession a number of moments from his biography, from his childhood to his death, but precisely the most famous episodes, that have defined the hero's fate and have served as the topic of many works of art, are lacking on the gorytos in question. Here one would seek in vain the dipping of the child Achilles into the waters of the Styx river, or scenes of the battles under the walls of Troy, or the meeting with Priamos, or the image of the chariot of Achilles, dragging Hector's body. Researchers have long come to the conclusion that the goryti reproduced only some of the scenes from the work of art which the Pontic artist used as his model; hence he had to make a certain selection of the motifs which he wished to depict, but it is not clear what criteria guided him to make that choice.

All these facts acquire a logical explanation, assuming that in depicting scenes from Greek mythology, Scythians were not interested in their genuine content so much, but rather in the closeness of the scenes and motifs incarnated in them to some elements in their own mythology. Most probably, out of the



*Fig. 64. Herakles strangling the lion. Gold appliqué from Chertomlyk*

*Fig. 65. Scenes from the life of Achilles. Gold casing of a gorytos from Chertomlyk, detail*









*Fig. 66. Medusa, Herakles, "Silenus". Gold appliqués on a horse's bridle. Chmyreva barrow*

vast repertory of ancient mythological iconography the Scythians chose to decorate their monuments only with those motifs which could be interpreted relatively easily as personifications of the heroes of Scythian myths. As we have noted earlier, such an attempt had already been made at the dawn of Scythian history. However, it failed then, because in the strictly canonical art of the Ancient East or of the early Ionic cities, with the poor arsenal of images and patterns, it was very difficult to find images that would be susceptible to such an interpretation. Later Greek art, being much freer in the choice of themes and images to depict, as well as being richer in positions, postures of the figures and their various artistic renderings, provided many more opportunities for attaining this goal. With that interpretation in mind, the role of images and scenes borrowed into Scythian culture from Greek mythology, proved to be perfectly identical to the role played by the other anthropomorphic pictorial works of art, which were widespread

during the same period, especially Scythian and Graeco-Scythian ones.

In the past, B.N. Grakov drew attention to the abundance of gold appliqués decorated with the image of Herakles fighting against the lion in Scythian barrows, and he launched the hypothesis that the Scythians perceived them as personifications of their own mythical progenitor, Targitaos-Herakles, fighting against and defeating some monster. The assumption put forward earlier that in Scythian mythology the predator stood for the chthonic world, the world of death, correlates well with such an interpretation. Actually, these images reflect the idea of overcoming death, which was so important in the system of notions of Scythian society. Of analogous significance here were the images of the victory of the Scythian-looking figure over the griffins, the scene of the fight against the dragon-like predator, decorating the comb from Gaymanovaya barrow, discussed in the second chapter of the book, as well as the scene decorating the standard from Slonovskaya Bliznitsa.





Naturally, the Scythian interpretation of the images of Herakles as personifications of the local mythical figure were made easier by the circumstance that – as suggested by the versions of the Scythian genealogical myth, preserved by Herodotus and by other ancient authors – this hero was traditionally identified with Targitaos in the Northern Pontic region. This cannot be said about other Greek deities and heroes, whose images were quite typical of Scythian complexes. On the contrary, the figures which Herodotus identified with deities from the Scythian pantheon – Zeus, Poseidon, Ares, and others – were not at all represented in the decorative patterns of Scythian monuments. Apparently, the reinterpretation of the images is based not so much on the general content of the Scythian myths or on the functional essence of their personifications, but rather on the concrete specificities of the reinterpreted images: the specificity of the image of the mythological creature or the character

of the scene, which find closer or more distant analogies in the myths of the Scythians. Sometimes this resulted in the formation of new pictorial texts, quite unexpected from the standpoint of the proper Greek tradition.

It is interesting to note, for instance, the repertory on the appliques from horse-trappings found in Chmyreva barrow (*Fig. 66*). They are decorated with the images of three Greek mythological characters: Herakles wearing the lion's helmet, the Gorgon Medusa with hair like snakes, and the so-called Silenus – an ugly man with a flat nose and very full lips. Their inclusion in the decoration of a bridle seems to imply a definite semantic unity. However, from the point of view of Greek mythology, these characters are not at all interconnected. On the other hand, if we accept the hypothesis that their images were interpreted in Scythia in accordance with the content of the local myths, we obtain a logical explanation of such a combination. Let us recall the epigraphic version of the Scythian genealogical myth: Herak-



les defeated the water (chthonic) creature – Araxes – and married his daughter Echidna (the snake-legged goddess). From everything said so far, Herakles wearing the lion's helmet (i.e. having defeated the lion) in the appliqué from the Chmyreva barrow, was the winner over the chthonic forces: Medusa, with her snake-like hair, was undoubtedly a variant of the snake-like chthonic creature, an analogue of Echidna. In that case, we have every reason to assume that the "Silenus" image was treated in Scythia as the personification of the third principal figure in the cited Scythian myth: the chthonic monster Araxes.

It is curious that the images of Medusa and of the "Silenus" were combined in the decoration of yet another Scythian work of art: the gold phiale from Kul-Oba (*Fig. 67*). This vessel is very similar in shape and decoration to the already analysed phiale from the Solokha barrow. Similarly, the phiale from Kul-Oba has an umbo in the central part of its bottom, surrounded by three rows of images which, according to the proposed interpretation, symbolize the ternary chthonic world. However, if on the Solokha vessel this is designated by three rows of battle scenes, on the phiale from Kul-Oba we see two rows of masks of Medusa and a number of "Silenus" images. This is in confirmation of the assumption that the latter were also interpreted in Scythia as one of the chthonic deities (Araxes, Borysthene, etc.).

It should be noted that Medusa's masks were the most frequent image in the ancient mythological iconography of Scythia, in addition to the image of Herakles. This fact confirms better than anything else his firm position in the local system of notions.

And finally, let us consider the cited goryti, decorated with scenes from the life of Achilles (*Figs. 65, 68*). The fact that such images produced using the same mould have been found four times testifies to the extreme popularity

*Fig. 67. Detail from a gold phiale from Kul-Oba*

of the image among the Scythians and to the importance of the notions behind it in the system of Scythian ideology. What could be the interpretation of that image in Scythia? In order to find the answer to this question, let us look at the scene which serves as an introduction to the entire pictorial narrative. It is usually interpreted as a moment of teaching the young Achilles how to shoot with a bow. However, one cannot fail to





notice that the interpretation of that scene here can easily be perceived also as an episode in which the older man is handing over the bow to the younger one. Then that episode reveals a direct semantic connection with the content of the story about the trials of the three sons of Targitaos, and the rendering of that story on the vessel from the Voronzh barrow, analysed in the second chapter. Indeed, there the youngest brother

who was victorious is depicted as a beardless youth, whereas on the gorytos a child is receiving the bow. Nevertheless, such variations are perfectly common in folklore: in the cases when the hero's youth is an important element of the story, an extreme form for the expression of that idea would be to refer the episode in question to the period of his childhood.

The next scene shown on the gory-



tos reflects the moment when Achilles is discovered on the island of Skyros, where he was hiding among the daughters of king Lykomedes. As is known from the Greek myth, the cunning of Odysseus made it possible to find the hero, although he was dressed in women's clothes. He penetrated into the palace as a merchant offering different commodities to the king's daughters, among which there were weapons as well. Achilles naturally reached for the weapons. In fact, the scene on the gorytos may be interpreted as the hero's trial with weapons, in order to reveal his true warrior's nature, and we saw that this was precisely the function of the trial proposed to the sons of Targitaos in the Scythian myth. Actually, the first two episodes shown on the gorytos depict together the form and the essence of that episode of the Scythian myth. The third scene – the parting of Achilles with king Lykomedes – is also semantically close to it. Its indisputable belonging to the same Scythian myth is evidenced by the way in which it appears on the gorytos (the young victor in the trial and the old man). A semantically analogous scene was seen, for example, on the cup from Kul-Oba. In this way, all three groups forming the upper row in the composition of the gorytos correlate well with the trial story and with the investiture of the mythical first king of the Scythians, the youngest of the sons of Targitaos-Herakles.

In the lower row we see the scene in which Achilles is putting on his armour, which is another emphasis of his warrior's nature. However, the Scythian figure is also the progenitor of warriors, hence this scene was perfectly relevant in the pictorial narrative about him. Finally, the composition ends with the image of Thetis, Achilles' mother, holding the urn which contains his ashes; this is evidence of the hero's death and is the episode ending the narrative. As we have seen, the death of the youngest of the brothers brought the story

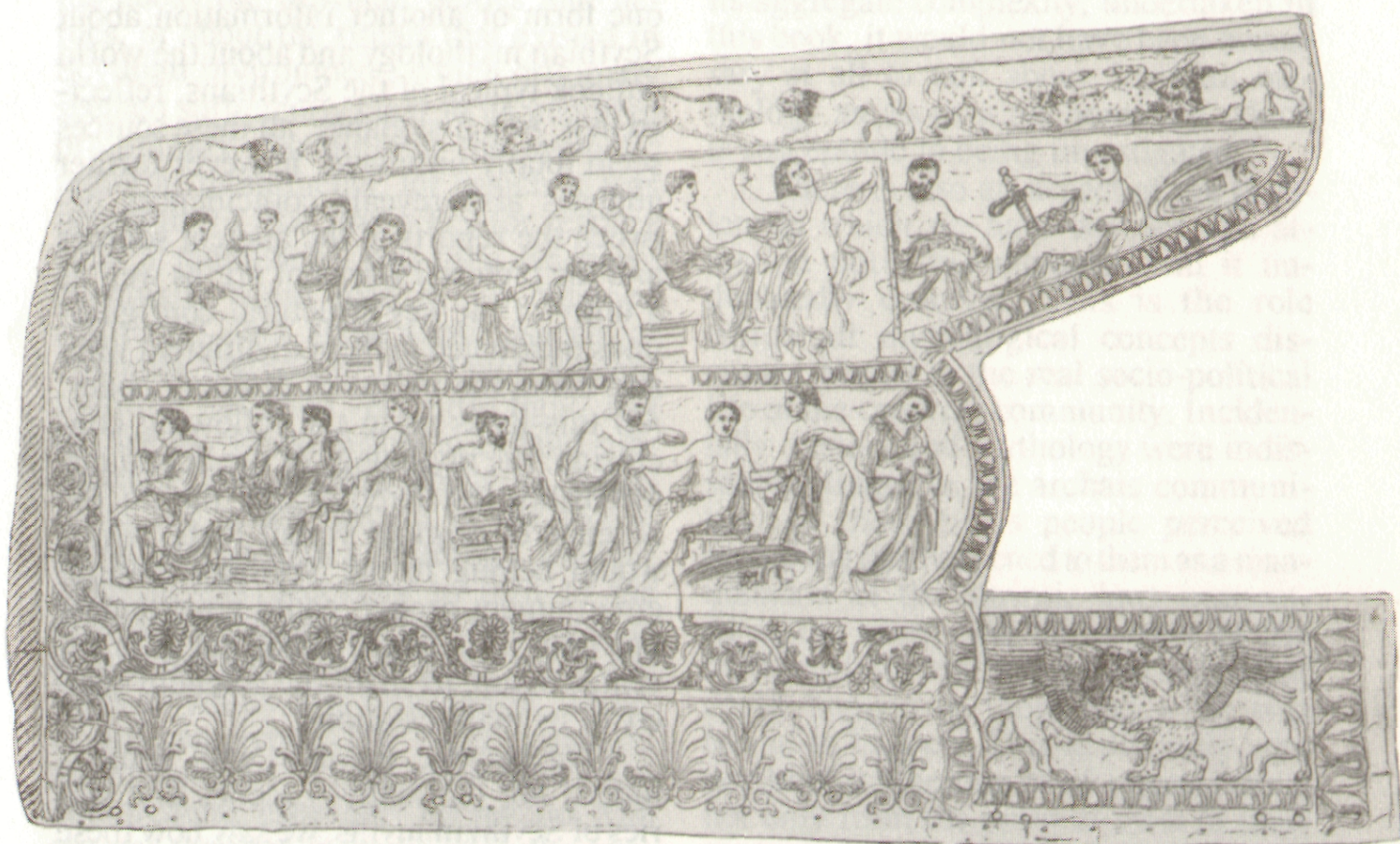
*Fig. 68. Scenes from the life of Achilles.  
Gold casing of a gorytos from  
Chertomlyk*

about the son of Targitaos in the Scythian tradition to an end.

In other words, Scythian goryti proved to demonstrate only those episodes in the biography of Achilles and moreover in such a specific rendering, which have direct parallels in the myth about the progenitor of the warriors' caste and the first king of Scythia – about the hero called Kolaxais in one of the versions of the Scythian genealogical myth. It is also hardly a coincidence that all these scenes were used for the decoration of the gorytos – the sheath for the bow, i.e. the same attribute which was correlated in Scythian mythology with that hero and with the social group stemming from him.

In the light of the hypothesis about the reinterpretation to which the rendering of themes from Greek mythology was subjected in a Scythian environment, it is easy to understand the rather





strict selection of the works of art belonging to that cycle, found in Scythia, with the multiple repetition of some motifs and the complete ignoring of others. Naturally, we cannot always succeed in determining exactly what content the Scythians "read" in one Greek image or another, because our knowledge about the narrative tissue of Scythian mythology is rather incomplete. One cannot likewise rule out the sporadic penetration into Scythia of objects, the images on which were perceived by the indigenous population as being purely decorative. But most probably such images were very few, because in the archaic age, when mythology played such an important role, the objects decorated with "accidental motifs" would simply have found no market.

Concluding the brief survey of pictorial works of art found in Scythian complexes, we can say that in spite of

their different origin, their belonging to different cultural traditions and the different workmanship of their execution, they all served one purpose: performing the role of mythological texts that have incarnated the typical Scythian notions about the Universe, about the order governing the Cosmos and about the ways in which cosmic and social stability can be achieved. In nonliterary societies such pictorial texts – in addition to oral verbal formulae – were the principal means of communication between the world of gods and the world of human beings, the main sphere for expressing religious and mythological concepts. The verbal formulae of the Scythians have been irretrievably lost. Hence pictorial formulae are so much more important for reconstructing the spiritual life of Scythia. Without their studying, our knowledge about Scythian mythology would have been infinitely poorer.



# Conclusion

Gradually, step by step, we examined the available sources containing in one form or another information about Scythian mythology and about the world outlook typical of the Scythians, reflected in it. At a first glance, all these sources seem totally unrelated, however further analysis also reveals coincidences between the reports of the ancient sources and the pictorial works of art, as well as a unity of the key structural configurations incarnated in them in different ways and using the means of different codes. All this leads us to the following conclusion: the mythology of the Scythians, ostensibly lost irretrievably due to the absence of original verbal texts, which would belong to the Scythian cultural environment proper, could nevertheless not only be reconstructed, but it is revealed before us in all the splendid variety of its manifestations.

We became familiar with some – indeed not too many – scenes and stories of Scythian myths, we saw how these people imagined the establishing of order in the world and how they perceived that order; we succeeded in revealing some specific features of the social and political structure of society, which – according to Scythian notions – dated back to the time of the “creation of the world”; we also found out what ritual acts were called upon to preserve the stability of these institutions and hence to guarantee the well-being of Scythia, which was following the patterns of behaviour bequeathed to it by the ancestors; we saw the role of the monuments of mythological art in the life of the Scythians, with their reproduction in terms of scenes or symbolic images of the same structure of the creation of the world, whose emergence was the central story in Scythian mythology.

Naturally, the essentially different nature of the adduced monuments in itself deprives us of the possibility to present consistently the topic of interest to us: the things in the stories of Herodo-



tus about the Scythian deities and heroes, or about the rituals that existed in Scythian environment, which originally seemed sufficiently clear to us, required preliminary decoding in the symbolic pictorial monuments, for which it was necessary to find first a key for reading such a monument. But then when we eventually could read it, we obtained additional data about those aspects of Scythian mythology, on which ancient tradition has shed very little light, and in this way we were able to expand substantially our notions about it. Sometimes the actual content of the monument gave us such a "reading", in other cases it was necessary to turn to the analysis of the general intrinsic regularities of mythological thinking and to the ways in which it is reflected in "texts" of different types. The latter cases are, understandably, a little more difficult to comprehend, especially for readers who are not familiar in detail with the contemporary science about the myths and about the role which they played in the life of the ancient communities. Therefore, it is possible that those sections in the book, in which the proposed reconstruction is based on the specific methods of that science, might seem less convincing that the sections devoted to the Scythian narrative myths in their "pure form". However, the author assumes that the intricate network of interrelations, discovered among the various elements of the Scythian mythological picture of the world, rendered in different ways, serves to a certain extent in itself as evidence about the non-accidental character of all coincidences discussed, thus lending support to the proposed interpretations. There is no doubt that some of the hypotheses expressed on the pages of this book will be disproved in the future, or other concrete aspects will be added to them in the course of further research on the problems discussed. Nevertheless, perhaps without the preliminary analysis of the varied material in

its aggregate complexity, undertaken in this book, it would not have been necessary at all to talk about Scythian mythology as about a phenomenon which is susceptible to being investigated.

There is also an aspect of the problem to which we have devoted less attention until this moment than it undoubtedly deserves. This is the role which all mythological concepts discussed played in the real socio-political life of the concrete community. Incidentally, history and mythology were indissolubly linked in the archaic communities: in those times people perceived everything that happened to them as a manifestation of the intrinsic laws incarnated in the myth, and the content of the myth explained to them in advance what could happen to them and what was bound to happen. This is precisely why Scythian mythology is of interest to us not only from the point of view of their content, but also as an instrument for understanding the Scythian's own views about the world around him, and accordingly – as a key to the entire Scythian culture.

In order to reconstruct the mythology of the Scythians, we have constantly used as a source not only written texts, but also the material objects and monuments which used to belong in the past to real Scythian life. This is why, we inevitably approached this mythology not only as the object of analysis by armchair scholars, isolated from the surrounding context, but we also constantly interfered in the sphere of its real existence in a Scythian environment and touched upon the problem of the role it played in Scythian society. Nevertheless, in conclusion we would like to adduce yet a few more examples about this live existence of the Scythian myth.

As we can recall, the concluding passages of the Scythian genealogical myth tell about the emergence of the tripartite caste system, which determined the social structure of Scythian



society. Naturally, this system could not in any way exhaust the entire complex stratification of society in Scythia, just as the ternary model identical to it did not exhaust the structure of the society of the Indo-Iranians from much earlier times. In reality, the social organism of Scythia was much more complex. The archaeologist E.P. Bunatyan recently analysed a large number of ordinary Scythian burials dated to the 4th century BC. That researcher discovered in them an elaborate gradation that corresponded to the property status of the deceased and to the amount of labour invested in each sepulchral construction. Her analysis does not include the tumuli built for the Scythian aristocracy, which in their turn are not at all homogeneous either. The objective differentiation of Scythian society was behind all that variety. Nevertheless, in the course of centuries – since the epoch of Indo-Iranian unity at least until the end of the Scythian period – the Scythians themselves viewed their society through the prism of the tripartite model, whose origin can be traced back to the mythical times of the first ancestors, and in their eyes it was that structure which determined its social organization. E.A. Grantovskiy drew attention to the information contained in Lucian's novel called *Scythian* or *Guest*. Lucian lived in the 2nd century AD, but in his narratives about the Scythians he used mainly sources that painted the picture of the 4th-3rd century BC. The fragment of interest to us tells about the hero who was known to have originated not from a "royal family", not from the *pilophoroi*, i.e. from the people who wore the sacred *pilos* on their heads, but from the mass of Scythians, from ordinary people. According to the observations of E.A. Grantovskiy, the stratification reflected here is identical to the one about whose emergence the myth refers: the royal family corresponds to the Paralatae, the *pilophoroi*

were the priests-Auchatai, whereas ordinary people were referred to as Katiaroi and Traspies in the mythological tradition. This is evidence about the living propagation of this notion in the Scythian world.

Unfortunately, for the time being we have been unable to distinguish the mass of burials investigated by archaeologists and to classify them into these three categories. It is particularly difficult to discern the specific features of the burials of priests. Incidentally, the graves of the representatives of that caste are generally very difficult to differentiate in ancient monuments. For example, it is still practically impossible to discern the burials of druids among the Celtic graves in Central Europe. Moreover, we saw that in Scythia there existed a tendency to push this social group as an autonomous caste, its functions being usurped by kings and by the military aristocracy: let us recall the structure of Scythian society, as reflected in Diodorus' version of the genealogical myth.

The other example concerns the political institution stemming from the three sons of Kolaxais. According to the Scythian tradition, they were the progenitors of the three kings that ruled over Scythia, which was divided into three parts. The Scythian epic story about the war against Darius, recorded by Herodotus, testifies that this was precisely the organization of the Scythian troops during that campaign as well; each king led his own troops, but one of them – Idanthysos – was the supreme military commander and apparently the supreme ruler of Scythia.

There is yet another evidence about this structure, and the interpretation of the images of the animal style, cited earlier, makes it possible for it to be revealed. Several rich military burials, dated to the Early Scythian period, were discovered along the middle course of the Kuban river, in the Northern Cauca-



sus, in the beginning of this century. For many years specialists have been arguing about the ethnic belonging of the deceased, i.e. whether they should be attributed to the Scythians or to the Maeotae from Kuban. However, recent research has shown that the steppes of the Fore-Caucasus were the springboard for the Scythians during the period of their campaigns into Western Asia, which allows to attribute to them the Kuban barrows with the highest degree of probability. Our attention should be attracted by two of them, which are located relatively close to one another: the first one near the village of Kostromskaya, the second one belonging to the well-known Kelermes necropolis. The grave goods belonging to the chieftains buried in these barrows included shields decorated with precious appliques in the form of emblems. The shield from the Kostromskaya barrow was decorated with a gold stag figure, which was discussed earlier, whereas the Kelermes shield featured the famous panther image. Let us recall that according to the proposed interpretation, these animals symbolized the middle and the lower world in the system of images of the animal style. And in accordance with the laws of the mythological interpretation of the world, the three kings of Scythia had to be interpreted undoubtedly as belonging to the three levels of the Cosmos. Could the appliques on the shields from the Kuban barrows then be evidence that the union of Scythian tribes that lived there between the 7th and the 6th century BC was organized in accordance with the tradition stemming from the sons of Kolaxais? And should it not be expected that the excavations which were renewed here quite recently would yield in the future a shield decorated with the figure of an eagle or griffin?

However, the history of the reign of the three kings proved to be shorter than the life of the other Scythian mythological institutions. The activities of the

Scythian king Ataias are dated to the 4th century BC approximately. Ancient sources characterize him as the ruler of all Barbarians along the Pontic coasts, without mentioning even a word about the existence of other kings near him. In the past B.N. Grakov interpreted this information as proof that in order to centralize Scythia and to consolidate his power. Ataias usurped the power over the whole of Scythia, thus breaking the traditional system of reigning over the kingdom. However, in order to make this power completely legitimate in the eyes of his subjects, he – in the opinion of that researcher – nevertheless had to base his actions on the genuine mythological concepts, therefore he proclaimed himself to be the successor of Targitaos-Herakles, which had been the claim of his predecessors for a long time. As B.N. Grakov assumes, this circumstance also explains the abundance of images of Herakles in Scythian barrows from that time.

This hypothesis found brilliant confirmation when several years after the cited hypothesis was made public, the coins minted by Ataias in the Greek Pontic cities became known (*Figs. 69 and 70*). On the reverse there is a Scythian horseman, depicted in that artistic fashion which was so characteristic of the Greek compositions on Scythian themes. On the obverse of a number of coins from that group we see the head of Herakles with a lion's helmet, which is customary in ancient numismatics. This confirms the opinion that in his striving to prove the legitimacy of his power, Ataias resorted to the same Scythian myth, which served as a substantiation of the god-given character of the political institutions in Scythia during the previous centuries of Scythian history. The choice of a Greek iconographic variant for depicting the mythical progenitor was motivated by the fact that the coinage of Ataias had to present him as a legitimate ruler of Scythia not only in the





eyes of his own subjects, but also before the Greek Pontic cities; as we have seen, at that time the image of Herakles had merged in Pontic art with the image of the local hero Targitaos.

It is curious that several decades before Ataias, images closely related to the content of the same Scythian myth had already penetrated the coin minting of the Northern Pontic area. At the end of the 5th century BC, the city of Olbia minted coins with the name of EMINAKES and with the image of Herakles in a lion's skin, kneeling with one leg and pulling the string of his bow (*Fig. 71*). This image correlates directly with the composition on the vase from Kul-Oba and with the content of the story about the trials of the sons of Herakles-Targitaos. The name EMINAKES is non-Greek in origin and a number of researchers assume that he was a Scythian king who ruled over Olbia in some form or another. If this is so, we come to the following conclusion: in the first case, when Scythian kings resorted to minting of coins for some reason, they drew the motif to be depicted on the coin from the same myth which had served for many years as proof of the god-given character



of the power of the Scythian kings, and which was later used by Ataias as well.

However, this theme is depicted differently on the coin of EMINAKES and on the vessel from Kul-Oba: in the first case the sacred act of the pulling of the bow-string is performed by Herakles, in the second case – by his son. Does this difference have a meaning? If the institution of the three kings still existed in Scythia at the end of the 5th century BC, the depicting of the victorious son only meant an encroachment on the sovereignty of the two other Scythian kings; under these conditions, Herakles' figure was sufficiently neutral and at the same time very significant. The author of the cup from Kul-Oba not only did not evade this risky situation, but he intentionally emphasized the defeat of the two elder brothers. Could this reflect the circumstance that at the time of Ataias the ancient Scythian myth had acquired a new meaning; perhaps it already had to furnish arguments not in favour of the inter-caste hierarchy of Scythian society and not of the supremacy of one king over the other two, but the emphasis had to be on the rule of one king only, which had replaced the earlier institution of





*Fig. 69. Coin of king Ateius, reverse*

*Fig. 70. Coin of king Ataias, obverse*

*Fig. 71. Olbian coin of Eminakos*

the three kings? The new times gave rise to a new understanding about the ancient ideological institutions, but still within the frameworks of the traditional mythological world outlook about the world.

\* \* \*

Every year archaeological excavations yield new monuments of Scythian culture, which await their comprehensive interpretation. The first acquaintance with such new finds does not always allow us to imagine fully the historical and cultural-historical information that can be gleaned from them. Only by comparing them with all available data, they gradually become a valuable source, more specifically a source on the history of Scythian ideology. Examples in this respect have been adduced on many occasions on the pages of this book. Since the excavations of Scythian monuments are unusually intensive nowadays, there is every reason to anticipate that our knowledge about Scythian mythology and about its place in the life of the Scythians would increase with every year and would become more complete.



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